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Vol. 7, No. 2 FALL, 1948 Price 25c

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GOOD CRIMES *are* COMING

A Preview of Cases on the Calendar for Our Next Issue

EDDIE McCRAE was young and footloose and restless. In fact, he often regarded himself as a first class lug. A lug who once had dreams of being an architect and designing great office buildings, but instead went off to war and learned how it felt to stick a knife into another man and watch him die. A lug who came back with no strings, no roots — and with an ever-present urge inside him to see what lay over the next hill or around the next corner.

There were thousands of other young men just like him. Restless and jaded, tired and unhappy, seeking great things but caught in a rut. Craving excitement or change—anything to shatter the monotony of every-day existence.

The Phantom Blonde

That was why Eddie got interested in the phantom blonde. He was grasping at straws. The girl was a will-o-the-wisp — an elusive, golden-haired beauty who vanished without a trace. Because it offered something exciting to do, Eddie decided to try and find her. It promised to be a great adventure. He never figured that he was walking into something that could smash his life. He never figured that the trail would lead straight to murder and that he would be caught in the middle of it.

What happens after that forms the basis of one of the most exciting book-length novels we have ever had the pleasure of publishing, and it will appear in the next issue: The Lady in Question, by Will Oursler.

This great novel offers a fine combination of topnotch writing, gripping suspense, hard-hitting action and a smashing climax. And as an extra added attraction we have scheduled a very unusual crime novelet entitled "The Wrong Envelope" by another ace mystery author, Q. Patrick, and featuring the well-known Lieutenant Trent.

These two long fiction pieces along with a big collection of short stories will provide hours of reading entertainment for all our mystery fans.

Will Oursler, author of "The Lady in Question" will be remembered for his highly successful novel, "Schooled to Kill" which appeared in MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE last Fall and which was recently published in book form by Simon and Schuster, Inc. under the title "Departure Delayed." This novel as well as "The Lady in Question" carry on the tradition of great writing Oursler has built up through the years with such memorable yarns as "Folio on Florence White" and "The Trial of Vincent Doon."

Looking for Excitement

"The Lady in Question" begins harmlessly enough with Eddie McCrae, a private investigator for a collection agency, making the rounds of Manhattan bars with some of his former war buddies. All of them were having a good time except Eddie. Eddie was bitter and lonely. He had no relatives. He had no girl. He wasn't doing the kind of work he wanted to be doing. And he was looking for excitement.

(*Continued on page* 8)

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GOOD CRIMES ARE COMING

(*Continued from page* 6)

Sometime during the early morning hours their crowd was joined by a little bald-headed man named Jonson, a janitor in an apartment building on Sutton Place. Gradually the talk shifted from war experiences to women. And after most of the fellows had talked about their girls or wives Jonson began talking about a beautiful blonde. Her name was Hazel Parnell and she played a violin.

Jonson went into ecstasy about Hazel, telling how lovely she was, how he had a key to her apartment and how she invited him up on occasions to listen to her music. The inevitable ragging followed. Some of Eddie's friends scoffed at the idea that Jonson even knew such a girl. When he protested it was all true they jokingly told him to telephone her and ask her to join them.

Half-drunk as he was, the change that came over Jonson was quite noticeable. He turned white. Fear churned in his eyes.

"You can't see her!" he blurted. "Nobody can see her. Nobody ever will see her."

All in Fun, But—

Someone said that maybe she was missing and that the police ought to be notified. It was still all in fun. Nobody took Jonson or the mysterious blonde seriously. But Jonson got panicky.

"Can't call the police! Mushn't. Nothin' wrong. Understan'? Just—she went away. Thash all. . ."

In the general revelry that followed everybody forgot about Hazel. Everybody but Eddie McCrae. He alone had detected the uneasiness in Jonson's manner. He alone realized that Jonson had said more than he intended. And he was sure something was amiss.

Later, after they had ditched the others, Eddie settled down to prying more information about the girl from the janitor. He learned that two strange men had visited her the pre-

vious night and that the next day when Jonson had gone to visit her the place was empty, the windows wide open.

Eventually Jonson passed out. Eddie seized his opportunity, found the key to the girl's apartment in Jonson's pocket and made a dash for Sutton Place.

The Smashed Violin

He found the apartment deserted. It was richly and elaborately furnished. Portions of an untouched luncheon were on a dining room table. A dress and underwear were laid out on the bed as if the blonde had been preparing to go out. And the tub in the bathroom was half-filled with water. Everything pointed to a quick and unexpected leave-taking. And, Eddie wondered, was it voluntary or accomplished by force?

In a small conservatory he found a music stand and a violin. The violin had been ruthlessly smashed in two. It was wanton and senseless destruction and it puzzled Eddie.

An examination of her clothing revealed two distinctly different types of apparel. It was almost as if the girl had been leading a double life. Then on a top shelf of a closet Eddie found a green box with letters. He was about to examine them when he heard the front door open and close.

He ducked out to the kitchen and the rear door. He stepped out into the hallway, looked back. A tall, dark-haired man was entering the kitchen. The man leaped toward him. Eddie slammed the door in his face and raced down the rear stairs, his pursuer after him. Oddly enough, when Eddie reached the street he discovered he was no longer being followed.

By that time it was dawn and he had to rush back to his own rooms to clean up and go to work. It was not until that evening that he was able to examine the contents of the green box thoroughly.

A Fortune in Jewels

Actually, there were only a few letters. Beneath the letters was another smaller box. And Eddie's heart jump-

(*Continued on page* 187)

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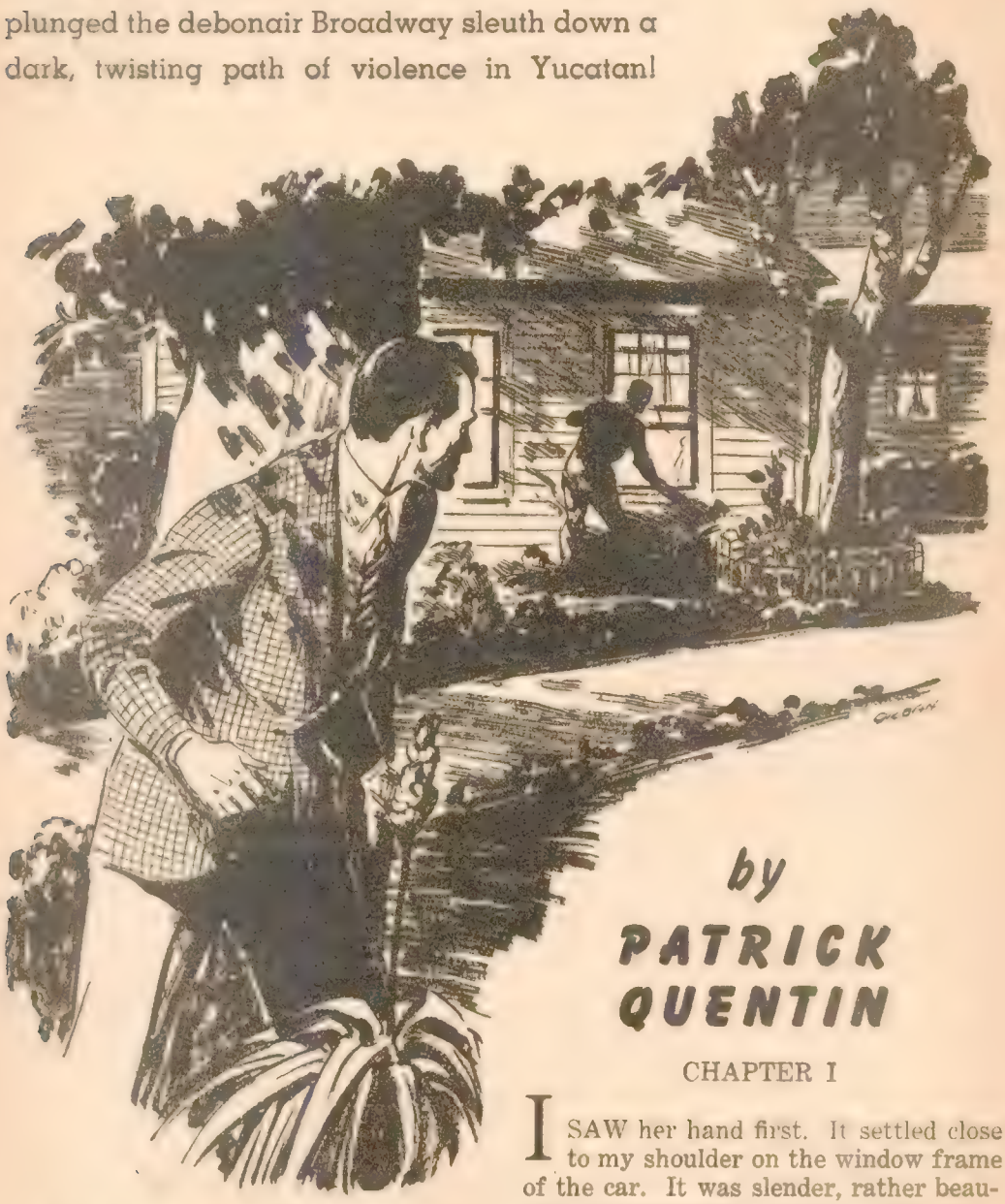


A PETER DULUTH NOVEL

by PATRICK QUENTIN

CHAPTER I

I SAW her hand first. It settled close to my shoulder on the window frame of the car. It was slender, rather beautiful, unexpectedly white in this country of dark skin and tropical sun. It was

a determined hand too. It clung tenaciously as if the car and I fulfilled some need and were not to be allowed to slip away.

She said: "Excuse me."

I ducked so that I could see her. She was standing in the full glare of the sidewalk. Behind her, the open entrance of the Hotel Yucatan showed blue and white tiles stretching to the patio, and a few loitering waiters. She was the sort of blonde that rolls off the assembly lines in Hollywood or Broadway but could start a riot here in Mexico. At least, that was my first impression. She was dressed with the depersonalized perfection of a model, in a silver-gray suit. She held a large red pocketbook.

She said: "I heard you telling the hotel boy you were driving out to the ruins at Chichen-Itzá."

"Sure."

Her hand was still firmly on the window frame. "I've missed the tourist sight-seeing car. I believe there's a bus, but it's full of turkeys and pigs."

"Hop in."

"It's all right?"

"Of course."

She walked around the car, threw her suitcase in the back with my own gabardine bag and got in beside me. She crossed her legs. They were model's legs. Her silver-blond hair, clean, well-brushed, hanging to her shoulders, was model's hair too. All the props were so standard that it took me some moments to realize the individuality of her profile. It was quite unusual, angled, with stressed cheekbones and a straight nose. She had that polyglot beauty that only America produces—from a piece of this race and a piece of that. The effect was disconcerting. She couldn't have been much more than twenty. Young to be bumming around the wilds of Yucatan alone—if she was alone.

I asked: "Interested in Mayan ruins?"

She shrugged. "They're something one sees." She turned to face me. Her eyes were silver-gray too. "How about starting unless you want us to boil alive?"

MERIDA, even in the late afternoon, can be swelteringly hot. I rather resented the girl's dictatorial manner, but I nosed the car into the street and started forward past the white, pink and blue washed houses with their blind wooden doors which guarded the tiled privacy of the patios inside.

She slumped back against the hot upholstery, gazing disinterestedly at a rickety horse carriage that wabbled ahead of us. She found a cigarette in her red pocketbook and lit it with a silver lighter. She was treating me like a chauffeur. I couldn't be sure whether this was due to glamour-girl insolence or a very young person's desire to appear poised.

I didn't particularly care. I wasn't in a phase where an unknown girl made an impression.

After six of the most difficult months of my life, I had just come through a crisis in my marriage. In Mexico, both my wife and I had thought ourselves in love with someone else. Our reconciliation was still new, and as precarious as skin over a healed wound. The few weeks we had spent living together again had been dangerously awkward. When Iris received a movie offer, we thought it was safer to stay apart for a while. She went to Hollywood alone.

The experiment seemed to be working. On my own in Mexico City, I had written a play. I am more producer than playwright, but I was quite pleased with the result. Iris was enthusiastic about the script and wanted to act it on Broadway that winter. We had written back and forth excitedly about plans and, through the play, we had begun to be natural with each other again. Now her movie assignment was almost over and we were planning to meet in New York in ten days.

from Peril Straight to the Arms of Murder!

The thought of seeing her again was as exciting and uncomplicated as it had been in the old days.

I had flown to Yucatan a week before because it seemed stupid to miss some of the most spectacular ruins in the world. In Merida, I had hired a car, explored what little of the state was acces-

Peter Duluth

sible by road and, incidentally, contracted a painful case of sunburn on the tropical sands of the seaport, Progreso. By now I was used to the friendly company of the small, dark Yuacatecan Indians. The fashionable aloofness of this girl at my side was out of my mood.

If anything, I wished she hadn't happened to me.

She had tossed away her cigarette and was watching the passing sisal fields with their geometric lines of henequen plants squatting like giant artichokes on the red earth. Suddenly she said:

"I'm Deborah Brand."

"My name's Peter Duluth."

She didn't react to the name, which was a relief. It meant she wasn't one of those would-be actresses who know the telephone numbers of all the casting offices better than they know their alphabets. I said: "Down from the States on vacation?"

"I've just flown up from Balboa. I missed my connection to Mexico City. That's why I'm going to the ruins. One has to do something with time."

She was very young to have become that blasé about time. I glanced at her curiously.

"American?"

"Sort of. You?"

"Sure."

"Oh."

She was fumbling in her red pocketbook for another cigarette. Her complete disinterest in me was beginning to pique me.

I said: "I'm in the theater. I produce plays."

She looked up, the unlit cigarette drooping.

"Oh," she said again.

SHE lit the cigarette. A black Mexican vulture lumbered reluctantly up from the carcass of a dog on the road ahead.

"Living in Central America?" I asked.

"No. Peru. At the moment. We're always changing. Father digs things up."

"An archeologist?"

"That's what they call themselves. He did a lot of digging around here."

"At Chichen?"

"Yes."

"Then you know the place."

"In those days I was with mother chewing on a rubber comforter in Kansas City."

"Been around for someone so young, haven't you?"

"I'm not young."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty."

I laughed.

"Is that funny?"

"Not particularly, I suppose. It makes me, at thirty-six seem rather decrepit. That's all."

"Are you that old?" She scrutinized me with humorless appraisal. "You're well preserved."

The combination of naïveté and poise was quite authentic. I began to find Deborah Brand new and refreshing. I would have liked to ask why a kid of twenty should be flying alone from Balboa to Mexico City, but it seemed too leading a question. Instead I asked:

"You were born in the States?"

"Yes. My mother was American. She's dead."

"And your father?"

"A Finn. It's a funny nationality to have, but I can't help it."

"You speak Finnish?"

"Of course."

"And Spanish?"

"That's what I speak mostly now."

"You're very talented, aren't you?"

She flicked cigarette ash onto the car floor. "You're very curious, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry. I was just taking a polite interest."

She watched a cloud of yellow butterflies bob across the road in front of us. "Oh," she said.

She ignored me for a while and then slid a sidewise glance at the collar of my open shirt. "Quite a sunburn you've got."

"Yes."

"You should put something on it."

"I forgot to buy anything."

Unexpectedly maternal, she said: "I've got something. I'll give it to you when we get there."

She lapsed into silence again.

We were out in the country now. There are no rivers in Yucatan. The water runs deep underground, occasionally showing itself in strange crater-like pools where the limestone above has collapsed. The landscape is dotted with windmills. Their revolving flanged wheels glittered around us in the evening sunlight.

A little boy trudged along the bare road, carrying on his back a load of wood twice his own size.

A car horn sounded behind us. With a suddenness which startled me, Deborah Brand wheeled around, glanced through the back window and then settled down again into her seat. A moment later, a bus, bursting with passengers, roared recklessly past.

"The bus," I said. "Glad you're not in it?"

"Yes." And then in a polite voice: "Thank you."

AFTER a while we approached a village. Pretty Mayan cottages, like oblong shoeboxes with thatched tea-cosies perched on top, drowsed in their quiet yards where tropical shade trees dropped yellow and mauve blossoms among foraging chickens and turkeys. Near the center of town I saw a gas pump outside a store.

"Might as well get gas. I'm pretty low."

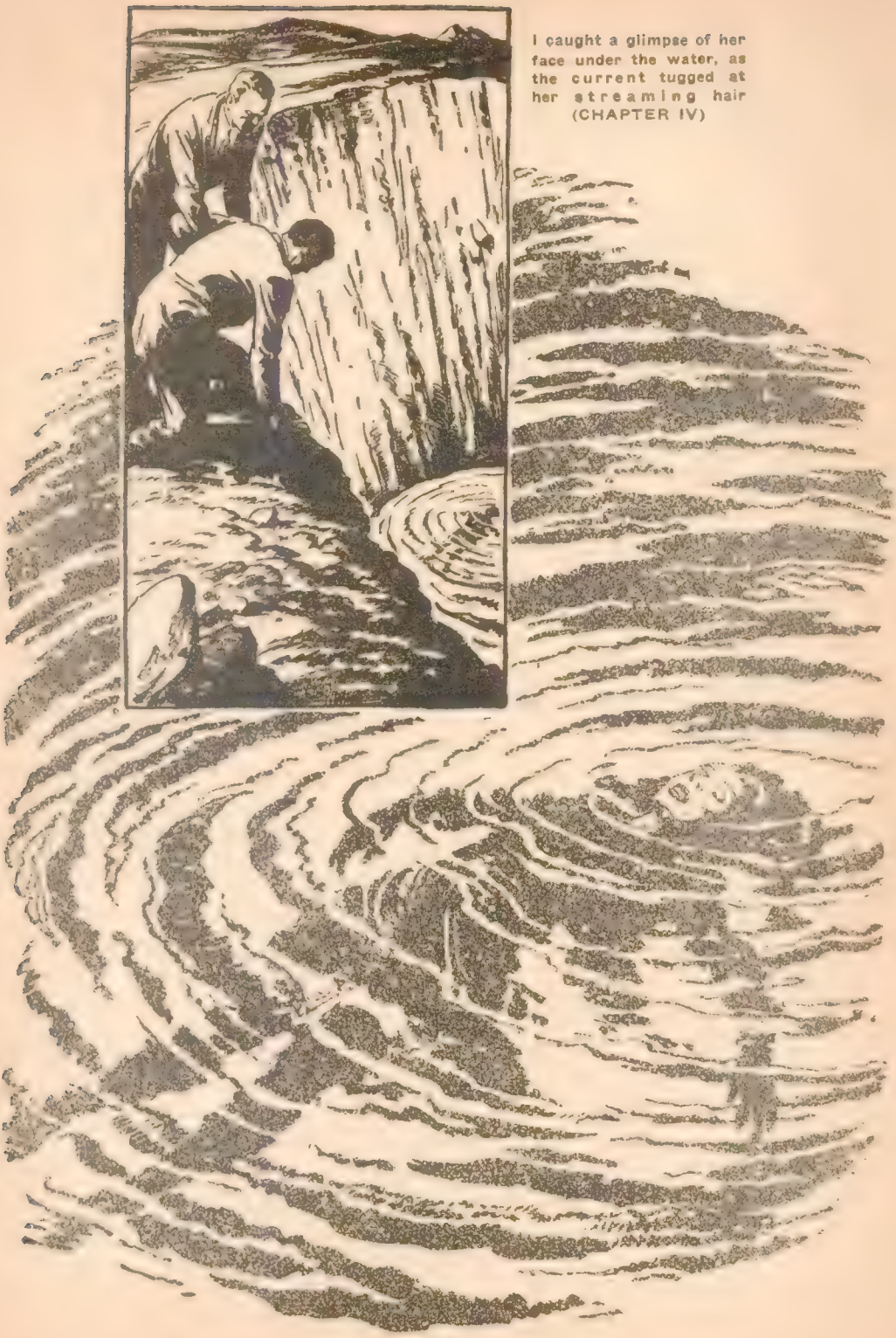
I stopped the car. I got out. So did she. Across the street in front of the school, Indian boys, their naked torsos gold as brown sugar, were playing a well-behaved game of basketball. To me it was as unlikely a sight as a bunch of American high school kids fighting a bull.

I nodded at the store. "They probably have iced soft drinks or something there. Want a drink?"

She shook her head. She was ignoring her surroundings as if a Mayan village was not worth the effort of focusing her eyes.

With my negligible Spanish I explained my needs to the store owner. While he played with the gas pump, I was dimly conscious of a car approaching from Merida. I glanced up. The car had stopped across the street. At the wheel was a big, good-looking Mexican in shirtsleeves, presumably a hired chauffeur. From the back seat emerged a woman with a movie camera.

She was obviously American, small, around fifty, with a certain indomitable quality about the way she planted her feet on the ground. Her shrill green traveling suit was creased at the back and there was a tired look to the unsuitably lavish cascade of purple orchids at



I caught a glimpse of her face under the water, as the current tugged at her streaming hair (CHAPTER IV)

her lapel. She made me think of bridge parties in New Jersey, luncheons at Schraffts, and packages from B. Altman's bumped against your knee in crowded buses.

"A compatriot." I turned to Deborah Brand, but she had disappeared. I supposed she had changed her mind about the drink.

It was clear that the little woman knew what she wanted out of life. What she wanted at the moment was the basketball game. She aimed her camera at the now self-conscious teams and let film whir. Then she tucked the camera under her arm and started back to the car. The driver was pointing out a huge, bleak church.

"I've got enough churches already to choke a goat." The woman's New York twang brought me a warm nostalgia.

As she spoke, she saw me and marched across to join me. She hardly came up to my shoulder. The orchids had little sad sprays of baby's breath mixed in with them.

"Hello," she said. "Are you going to Chichen too?"

I said I was. She was sweating slightly. The round black eyes in her chihuahua face were like little boys' eyes, eager not to miss anything. I rather liked her, the way you like the most unlikely people at the most unlikely times.

She said: "You staying at the Inn?"

"I plan to."

"How much are they rooking you? They're sticking me seventy-five pesos for one night. It's not the money. I hate being gypped."

She watched me suspiciously as if I were in on a bargain that had escaped her.

I said: "I'm afraid I don't know about prices. I'm going out cold."

"Oh." She glanced at the car. "Traveling alone?"

I didn't see the point of explaining Deborah. "Sort of."

"Driving yourself?"

"Yes. I hired it."

She sighed. "You're smart. That big handsome hunk of male"—she indicated her driver—"another fifty pesos. They all gyp you." An infectious grin came. "But why blame them? We're just a bunch of morons to them."

"Sure."

SHE held out her hand.

"Well, glad to have met you. My name's Lena Snood. Newark. Crazy name, but I was Hagenhofer before I married, so I guess I can't complain. See you at the Inn."

"I'll buy you a drink."

"I'll buy you one. You don't have to spend your money on an old hag like me."

A small girl in a scrap of a white dress had silently joined us and was yearning at us over a tightly clenched posy of wild flowers. Mrs. Snood noticed her.

"No," she barked. "No flores. Got flores. Orchids." Then with a grunt of resignation she opened her pocketbook and tucked a peso bill into the girl's hand. "There. Now run along and play or milk a cow or do whatever you little Mexican girls do." She shrugged at me. "See what I mean? Loot the Americans."

She stumped back to the car. As it moved off, she waved. I caught a glimpse of the purple orchids bobbing clumsily at her shoulder.

The man had filled up my car. I paid him and went into the store for Deborah. She was standing in the deepest shadow at the rear of the dark little room. The red pocketbook was tucked under her arm. She had a bottle of Pepsi-cola in her hand but she was doing nothing about it. Fear is one of the simplest human emotions to detect. Although there was no visible change in her surface calm, I knew from the first moment I saw her that she was afraid.

The realization came as a surprise to me. The little shop, redolent of harmless country things—goat-cheese, bananas, beer—was a haven of quiet. It seemed impossible that there could be anything in an obscure Yucatecan village to frighten her. Then I remembered how she had glanced back at the

sound of the bus horn and how she had disappeared at the approach of Mrs. Snood's car.

So she was afraid of someone who was or might be following her. That was it. Mrs. Snood? Could there conceivably be anything frightening about Mrs. Snood with her wrong color suit and her weary corsage?

My interest in Deborah, which had already been stirred, grew deeper and more complex. I went toward her. As I approached, I could feel the fear going out of her. She was fighting it down for my benefit. Beneath the silver hair, her chin was resolutely up. I hadn't the faintest idea what sort of trouble she was in, but it touched me that anyone so young should be afraid and so determined not to show it.

I would have liked to have asked what was the matter. A fight with her father? Or a too persistent lover? But she wasn't the type of girl of whom one asked intimate questions.

I said: "Ready to go?"

"Yes." With a languid gesture she put the unopened bottle down on the counter. She watched me from beneath half-closed lids, a standard movie-siren mannerism, world-weary, faintly seductive. "Didn't I hear you talking English out there with some woman?"

"Yes. A tourist on her way to the ruins too."

"Alone?"

"Yes. With a chauffeur. She's gone now."

She had spoken with the utmost indifference, but she didn't fool me. She skirted a sleeping dog and headed for the door. She threw over her shoulder:

"What sort of a woman?"

"Just a funny little woman with orchids."

Deborah was out in the full sunlight now. Her face was blank, almost stupid. It reminded me of faces I had seen in the war, faces of prisoners who knew their lives might depend on their facial expressions and who had withdrawn behind their deepest line of defense.

She got into the car indolently. As I joined her, I noticed that she shot a glance behind her at her silver airplane fabric suitcase.

It is quite normal for anyone to check up on their baggage. But Deborah Brand's backward glance had been a shade too anxious.

She was afraid of being followed. She was afraid that her suitcase might be stolen. What did that make her?

Certainly not just a tourist on a pleasure trip to the ruins.

CHAPTER II

WE drove on as the light gradually faded. The villages dropped away and, as the road grew worse and worse, we moved deeper into the featureless jungle. My mood had completely changed, influenced as it was by the girl's unidentified fear.

For anyone who has grown up with street lights and corner drug stores, Yucatan at night has a horror quality. Nothing belongs to anyone. Trees grow, vines clutch, large blossoms gleam faintly, and there are no side paths. An occasional mound, looming above the flatness, isn't just a mound. It's a buried temple, long forgotten, never probably to be excavated by a country now wealthy enough to indulge in the luxury of probing all its ancient secrets.

Darkness came. Deborah hardly spoke, but I was conscious of her. Disturbingly so. I thought of reasons why she might be afraid and, as I weaved far-fetched patterns of danger around her, she took on a glamour for me which I would never have felt in less exotic surroundings. Her light hair gleamed like the great pale flowers outside in the nothingness. Her perfume, which would have seemed merely fashionable in a New York night club or at the Reforma in Mexico City, was part of the setting. It might just as well have been coming through the open car window.

I stopped speculating as to why she

might be afraid and began to wonder how it would feel to kiss her. It wasn't the right feeling for a man in the throes of a reconciliation with his wife. I discouraged it.

Ahead, on the dusty road, a pair of small red eyes caught the car lights and glared balefully. A vague bird which had been sitting there flapped its wings and flew off through the darkness.

"Those birds on the road," said Deborah suddenly. "Father told me. The Indians think they're the soul of a Mayan princess. They told her that her lover was dead. She didn't believe them. She sits there waiting."

"Why did they tell her he was dead?"

"Everything was death around here. Cutting animals' heads off. Tearing

men's hearts out of their living bodies. Always blood. It was because there was no water, Father says. Giving the gods blood in exchange for the rain."

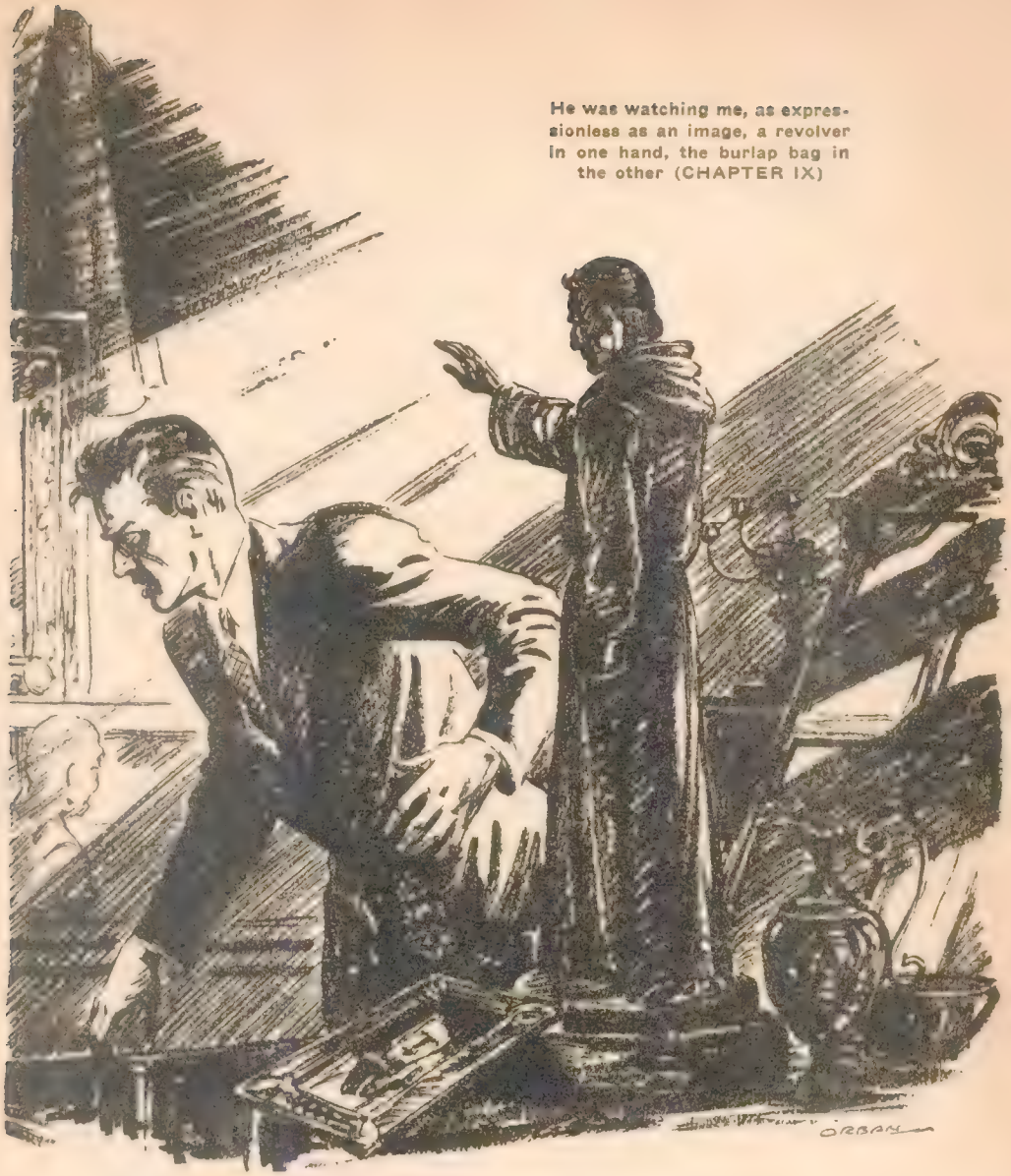
She lit a cigarette with a sharp spurt of matchlight. It made her profile gleam momentarily. She was watching me with a curious, speculative interest.

"Want one?"

"Thanks."

She leaned toward me and put the cigarette between my lips. Her finger was soft against the skin of my cheek. She slid back into her own place and lit another cigarette. Two more of the birds, waiting for their lovers, glowered red-eyed and loped away on gray wings.

A moon, thin as a nail paring, hung in the blue-black sky. Suddenly a huge blunt pyramid towered out of the jungle



He was watching me, as expressionless as an image, a revolver in one hand, the burlap bag in the other (CHAPTER IX)

to our left, black, brooding. It brought a curious chill. The moon hung behind it like an emblem. I could make out massive, hewn steps. I thought of blood oozing down them.

Then there was an electric light ahead. A wire fence started to our right. We were out of No Man's Land into private property. Under the light was a fancily carved wooden gate with a thatched roof over it. We had arrived at the Inn.

They must have heard our car approaching, for a white-coated waiter appeared at the gate and took our bags. He told me it was all right to leave the car parked on the road. We followed him up a path through a tropical garden where the jungle had been controlled into a glossy pattern of palms, flowering vines and citrus. We reached a broad terrace. This was obviously a luxury hotel. Mrs. Snood need not have worried about getting her money's worth.

BUT I wasn't sure I liked it. It jarred to have so much elegance and comfort and plumbing so close to that brooding basilisk of a pyramid.

We registered at a desk where there were postcards and American magazines. Most of the accommodations seemed to be in individual cottages which had been landscaped into the gardens. They assumed we were traveling together and gave us rooms in the same cottage. The waiter took us down another path to our cottage which was a handsome adaptation of the basic Mayan design.

As we parted at our separate doors, I said to Deborah: "You'll have dinner with me, won't you? And a drink?"

"Thanks. I'll change. I won't be long."

My room had a high thatched roof, two beds over which hung balloons of mosquito netting, and attractive, painted furniture. I had taken off my shirt and was washing my painfully sunburned arms and chest in a tiled bathroom when there was a tap on the door. I went to open it. Deborah was standing there. She had a jar of sunburn cream in her hand.

"Here," she said. "I remembered."

She surveyed my torso from gray, equivocal eyes. She took my arms lightly and twisted me around to look at my back. She was completely unselfconscious about the semi-nakedness of a relatively strange man.

"Quite a burn," she said. "Better let me do it." She shut the door. "Come over to the window."

We moved across the room. I heard her unscrew the cap of the sunburn cream. Then her hands began to move gently, rhythmically over my back. Her hair, soft and cool, brushed occasionally against my shoulder. It was a strange sensation, intimate and at the same time, impersonal.

Her voice came from behind me. "Married?"

"Yes," I said.

"Your wife not interested in ruins? Or not interested in you?"

"She's working. In Hollywood. She is an actress."

Her characteristic, disinterested "Oh" came.

Her hands went on working over my back.

"Turn around."

I turned. Her young face was as expressionless as ever. The tip of her tongue showed between her teeth giving her a grave air of concentration. She started to smear the cream over my chest. After that, she took one arm, then the other, bringing her hands down from the shoulder toward the wrist. When she had finished, she kept both her hands on my left wrist. She looked up at me steadily, challengingly.

To my complete surprise, she said: "Are play producers given to romantic episodes in darkest Yucatan?"

A tingle of interest caught me unawares. I said: "Could be. With enough provocation."

She took my other wrist. She leaned toward me and kissed me on the mouth. It was a long kiss, posing as a passionate one, but it lacked conviction. It reminded me of the kisses movie stars give to the winners of charity raffles.

She drew away. "Is that enough provocation?"

"It'll do."

My arm went to her waist. She twisted away, saying: "Not with the sunburn cream."

She crossed to the bed, screwed on the cap of the jar and put it down on the bedside table.

"You'll need this again tomorrow. See you in a few minutes. On the terrace."

Baffled, intrigued, and faintly suspicious too, I put on a clean shirt, tied a tie, slipped into my jacket and walked back through the garden to the main building. The cream had alleviated the soreness. I was pleasantly conscious of my glowing skin and of Deborah. Except for a huddle of waiters around one end, the long terrace was deserted. I imagined it was an off season for tourists.

I ORDERED a rum Collins and sat drinking it, watching great moths darting around the dark garden and wondering about a girl who could be frightened one moment and unconvincingly amorous the next. I wasn't worried about getting entangled. She was much too young.

A clatter of footsteps behind me made me turn. Mrs. Snood, in a formal, screaming magenta evening dress, was descending upon me. Her makeup had been repaired and yet, in spite of her grandeur, the same impression of breathless untidiness remained. Her eager black eyes were pleased to see me. She dropped into a chair at my side and said accusingly:

"You cheated. I was going to buy that drink." And then quickly: "How much they sticking you?"

"They didn't say." I thought of Deborah hiding in the village store. If it was Mrs. Snood of whom she was afraid, I would soon know.

The waiter came. Mrs. Snood ordered a Scotch and soda, explaining in grotesque Spanish that she was paying for my drink too. When the waiter went off, she turned dubious eyes on me.

"What do you think of my dress? In the States they said it would be suitable for Mexico. Bougainvillea shade, you know. Seventy-nine fifty. Think they stung me? Oh, well, it doesn't matter."

The waiter brought her drink. She kept up a continuous stream of chatter, telling me how expensive everything had been in Guatemala where she had just come from and speculating upon the probable cost of a hotel room in Acapulco which she was taking in before her return to Newark. I wondered how anyone was able to be quite so typically tourist. She hardly seemed real. She was like a superb foreign actress imitating an American from a close study of the comic strips.

Deborah didn't come. Beyond us from the dark road, I heard the sound of a car. The waiters heard it, too. One of them hurried away to greet the new arrivals. Soon they came up the path toward us.

There were three guests, an American man on his own and a couple. The man of the couple was probably American too, a big hulk of a man in his forties, with a pink healthy face, carrot-red hair and heavy hands that hung clumsily as he walked. The girl with him made a startling contrast. She was obviously Latin, small and pretty and Indian-looking, with beautiful big eyes and rather thick legs.

With them was a man whom I recognized at once as the driver of the daily sight-seeing car from the Hotel Yucatan. As the guests clustered at the desk to register, I remembered that Deborah had told me she had missed the sightseeing car. That had been her excuse for bumming a ride.

The realization that she had lied, a trivial fact in itself, suddenly altered the whole atmosphere of that scene on the terrace. I experienced one of those moments when nothing seems to be what it is supposed to be. The voices of the people at the desk sounded meaningless. Mrs. Snood's chatter could have been an animal's chatter. Even the garden seemed like a cardboard cut-out, something artificial to hide an ominous reality.

My mood was interrupted by an American voice saying: "Any objections if a fellow citizen shares your table?"

I looked up. So did Mrs. Snood in midsong. The American who had just arrived stood at our side. He was sloppily dressed in a sport's coat, baggy flannel pants and a yellow shirt open at the collar. His hair was either very light blond or gray. I couldn't be sure.

The whole impression he gave was equally anomalous. He might have been any age between forty-five and fity-five. He might have belonged to any profession, from engineer to publicity man. His face, with its heavy shell-rimmed glasses, had no set pattern either. He was smiling in a way that almost hid his eyes and brought out surprisingly girlish dimples on either side of a rather thin-lipped mouth.

"Why, sure, sit down." Mrs. Snood was watching him with her bright, universal interest. The generosity which she had such difficulty in controlling made her add: "Have a drink."

"Well, well, that's an idea, too." The stranger slumped into a chair and, half-rising again, held out his hand to Mrs. Snood. "Bill Halliday's the name, Cleveland, Ohio."

Mrs. Snood and I introduced ourselves. He looked around with a businessman's eye to values.

"Quite a lay-out they got here."

"A gyp joint," put in Mrs. Snood.

"Well." He drew the word out the way a man does when he is going to say something either sage or waggish. "But you know how it is. They've got us by the short hairs. We Americans are dopes enough to come visit the ruins. This is the only place we can stay. They can charge anything they want."

I was mildly depressed to find I had met up with yet another individual whose prime interest lay in counting the cost. But it lifted some of the burden of Mrs. Snood off me. They took an instant shine to each other. Halliday ordered a rye and water and they began to get chummy about a sister of Mrs. Snood's who had once lived in Akron.

Their conversation was banal as stage ad-libbing to cover a bungled entrance. Because I was thinking so much of Deborah, I played with the wild idea that it was for her entrance they were waiting.

And then she appeared.

She had changed into a long white evening dress which made her seem as insubstantial as a ghost. Heaven alone knew how she had managed to keep it so exquisitely uncrumpled in her suitcase.

She hesistated a moment on the edge of the terrace and then came toward us. She was completely the Fifth Avenue model now, something in a full color ad for the right cigarette or maybe a new brand of new nail polish. "Do you want to be glamorous in the evening?" I wondered how she had picked up the tricks, beating around Central and South America with an archeologist father.

I had half-expected something portentous in her meeting with Mrs. Snood, but nothing happened at all. Deborah sat down in the empty chair next to me, glanced incuriously at my two companions and murmured:

"Hello."

If she was afraid, there was no sign of it. Nor was there the slightest undercurrent of anything behind Mrs. Snood's inquisitively female appraisal. Mr. Halliday accepted the introduction with a broad, dimpled smile and said:

"Didn't I see you at the airport this afternoon?"

I glanced at Deborah. Here at least was some sort of tie-up. Her profile was toward me, that curiously individual profile which seemed to be trying so hard to quench its individuality. Her lashes flickered over the silver-gray eyes, but there was no other change in her expression.

"Perhaps," she said. "I was there."

The waiter hovered. Deborah ordered a Daiquiri with crushed ice, just the sort of drink a model would have ordered.

"Flying home to the States?" inquired Halliday.

"Yes." Deborah shrugged. "Sort of."

WITHOUT being impolite, she had frozen out the chance of any other personal questions. At that moment, the red-headed man with the little Latin girl reappeared, bowed us a vague greeting in passing and went further down the terrace to another table.

Mrs. Snood, to whom any private life seemed unendurable, called out: "Come have a drink with us."

The man turned back toward us. He moved with the weighty grace of an athlete just past his prime. When he reached us, he grinned. It was an extraordinarily disarming boyish grin which took ten years off the heavy face. His eyes were very blue and straight.

"Kind of you," he said. "But how about a rain check?" He nodded back

to the girl with the beautiful eyes, who had sat down at a table. "We were married today. We still feel a little private."

Mrs. Snood said: "Honeymoon? Why, congratulations."

We all murmured. The man smiled again and went back to his bride.

Mrs. Snood glanced after him. "Thank heavens he refused. I'd have had to buy champagne."

As she resumed her conversation with Halliday, my mood persisted. I could not escape from the idea that I was missing something, that some tiny clue might suddenly forge a connection between all these random people and words and bring a completely unexpected meeting. And, as the feeling grew, I caught, as it were by infection, the atmosphere around Deborah at my side. I began to realize that I could have been wrong. Behind the listless exterior there was a tension which might well have been fear. And, if it was, it was a specific fear of someone sitting there on the terrace.

Of whom? Of Halliday who had seen her at the airport? Of the honeymoon couple? Of Mrs. Snood?

Soon dinner was announced and the group dispersed. Deborah and I ate alone in virtual silence at a corner table. With only a handful of guests, the large dining room had a certain hushed dreariness. At one stage, the Inn's manager, a cheerfully dynamic Mexican with the acquired pep of a cruise-director, appeared to announce that there would be guides on hand to take the visitors around the ruins at eight-thirty in the morning.

After dinner, Deborah took brandy and coffee with me on the terrace. I no longer felt the tension in her and I wondered once again if I had been wrong about her. Perhaps what I thought of as fear had only been social shyness. Perhaps I was missing the point of the stodgy silence too. Perhaps she was so young that she intended it to be a sort of heavy-lidded glamour which would inflame me as a male.

But, before I could reach any definite conclusion, she rose abruptly and said: "I'm awfully tired. Do you mind if I give up and go to bed?"

The bride and groom were coming out of the dining-room. Deborah called: "Good night." As Mrs. Snood and Halliday bore down upon me, she left the terrace. I watched her slight, gleaming figure fade down the path toward the cottage.

CHAPTER III

I STOOD as much of the Halliday-Snood dialogue as I could and, pleading sleepiness, left them. I did not in fact feel tired. Once I was out of their sight, I turned off the path and strolled down to the Inn gates and out into the dark road.

My car was there, with the sight-seeing car from Merida parked behind it. With my back to the Inn, the two automobiles were the only signs of the Twentieth Century. The thin moon blazed. In front of me, the tops of trees, festooned with swaying tongues of vine, were black against the lighter sky. And beyond, looming in pale, eerie majesty, reared the silhouette of a great, crumbling tower.

It had a curiously magnetic effect upon me. Now that I could see more clearly, I noticed a wire fence in front of me, and a rough gate. I pushed open the gate and started down a worn path through the jungle. Crickets hummed. Moths fluttered. The night quivered with the feeling of motionless living things. Then the path curved to the right and, suddenly, there stretched before me a bald arena of grass bounded by great, shadowy temples.

I stepped into the open moonlight. Here all sensation of life ceased. I had moved into a dead world which cast its own potent spell. I could make out little detail, only the long, massive façades of the temples and the weird, lighthouse-like tower looming to the right. Fire-

flies, winking coldly, bobbed in front of it.

I lit a cigarette and dropped down on the dry turf. This was what I had come for. Not for the Inn and the riddle of a silver-haired girl who made spasmodic love to me and who either was or wasn't afraid.

Although I was ignorant of all Mayan lore, the theater man in me reacted strongly to the spectacular quality of the ruins and peopled them with images dimly remembered from books read as a boy—white-robed priests, awed, silent throngs, naked sacrificial victims. For some time I sat there, letting my fancies play, watching the weary, eroded façades. And then, so gradually that I hardly realized its approach, fear began to invade me.

It wasn't something I could rationalize. It crept out from some profoundly hidden recess of my being. I felt the shadow of alien things falling across my back. The palaces, seductively white and smooth in the moonlight, seemed now to be palaces of horror from which, at any moment, might come screaming something ancient and unmentionable.

I got up and hurried back to the road and the comfortable familiarity of the parked cars.

The Inn itself was in darkness now. Everyone must have retired early to be fresh for sight-seeing on the next day. In my abstraction I missed my way and found myself deep in the garden. I recognized my cottage off to the right and turned toward it. I was still several hundred feet away in the dark shadow of an orange tree when I stopped.

In the moonlight I could make out the back of the cottage. The nearest window was Deborah's. The next window was my own. Hovering close to Deborah's window was a human figure.

The window was open and, it seemed, the figure was crouched beneath it as if preparing to climb in. I felt a chill of anxiety. Then a dog started to bark, suddenly, angrily, and the figure glided away into the shadows of the garden.

The whole episode had taken only a few seconds. And my unnatural anxiety dissipated almost as quickly. There were quite a few waiters at the hotel. Probably the figure had been one of them on his way back to the servants' quarters beyond the garden. Almost certainly, it had been my preoccupation with the ruins which had given a sinister cast to a moment's loitering.

WHEN I reached the cottage, I had already half-forgotten the incident. Pleasantly tired, I stripped, put on pajamas, and climbed through the mosquito netting into one of the beds. I had nothing to read. I lay there smoking a last cigarette, thinking of Iris.

I had stubbed the cigarette and turned off the bedside light when a tap sounded at the door.

I sat up. The tap came again. I pushed my way through the mosquito netting and went to open the door.

Deborah Brand was standing there, dressed in white pajamas. The moon-washed hair fell loose around her shoulders. She moved into the room and closed the door behind her.

"Well, I've come," she said. "Had you given me up?"

I turned on the light. She dropped down on a little sofa that faced the bed, curling her legs under her. She had put on eyeshadow and more lipstick for a femme fatale effect. It didn't come off. She just looked pretty and young and slightly absurd.

She said :"I don't suppose you have a drink?"

"No drink."

"Then a cigarette?"

I found a package, passed it to her and flicked my lighter. She took my hand as she lit the cigarette and went on holding it. She looked up at me with her trick of half-closing her lids. That was overdone too.

She said: "Girls do this with play producers to get launched on Broadway, don't they?"

"In the movies."

"Only in the movies?"

She pulled at my hand. I let myself

be drawn down. She slid her arms around my shoulders and kissed me on the mouth. Although she tried to make it rough and experienced, there was a sweet girlish flavor to her lips and a freshness to the faint perfume. It would have been rather touching if it hadn't seemed so contrived. She was trembling, too. It was that unconvincing.

When she was through kissing me, I said: "What's your trouble? Want to get launched on Broadway too?"

"No," she said sharply. "No, of course not."

"Then why—this?"

"Why not?"

"Among other things, I'm a happily married man."

Her face was still close to mine. "Is anyone happily married?"

"I'm afraid that's too cosmic a question for me."

She said: "I came because I wanted to. Because I like you."

"You go to the room of every man you like?"

She flared: "Maybe I don't like many people."

I got up. She lay on the couch, the silver hair gleaming, her red lips parted, her eyes watching me, half-angry, half-uneasy. I said: "Why don't you come out from behind the Mata Hari and tell me the truth?"

"The truth? What truth?"

"What your game is?"

She jumped up. "I'm not going to stay here and be insulted."

"Then go back to your own room."

"No." The glamour pose collapsed. Her shoulders sagged. She was frankly just a young, frightened girl with too much makeup now. "No."

I put my hands on her arms and tried to make my voice paternal. "Listen. I'm not an ogre. If you want help, you don't have to give your all. I'll help you. For free."

She said stubbornly: "I don't need help. Why should I?"

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Why shouldn't you believe it?"

"I wasn't born yesterday."

Sitting at the wheel of the taxi, pointing a revolver at my stomach, was Junior (CHAPTER XI)

"Don't be silly. No one was. Only babies."

"In the first place you lied to me about missing the sight-seeing car."

SHE was ready for that.

"I know. I'm sorry. I was wrong. I thought it had left."

"In the second place you were scared of every car that followed us. The bus. And then later, when Mrs. Snood drove up, you ducked into the store to hide."

"No, I didn't. I wanted a drink."

"You didn't drink it."

"I changed my mind."

"And you're frightened of someone here. I'm almost sure. Who is it?"

"I'm not frightened of anyone."

"Just now I thought I saw a man hanging around your window. Is that why you're afraid?"

She stamped her foot in a little-girl show of temper. "I've told you I'm not afraid of anyone or anything. Why do you have to make such a drama? Is it the play producer coming out?"

"Okay," I said. "If you want it that way, you're not afraid. It's none of my business. But I have a right to know one thing. How do I fit in the picture?"

Her silver-gray eyes moved to my face. She blurted:

"Please, let me spend the night here."

"Why?"

"There are two beds. I won't be a nuisance. I promise I won't be a nuisance."

It was ridiculous to suspect a frame-up. This was the Mexican jungle; not Times Square.

I stalled: "It's not the usual procedure for a man to offer a bed to a girl when she has a perfectly good bed of her own."

"Do things always have to be usual?"

"Unless there's a good reason why they shouldn't be."

She was still looking at me earnestly. Suddenly her lips started to tremble.

"I'll tell you the truth. I did lie. I am afraid."

"That's better."

"There in the room alone, with the darkness and the jungle outside and the noises, it's terrible. I don't know why. It frightens me. It. . . Oh, I didn't want you to know. It's so babyish. I hate people to know I'm babyish."

It occurred to me that a girl who had lived with an archeologist father, trailing through the hinterland of Peru, should by now have grown used to jungle nights. Certainly, making love to a strange man was an elaborate way of finding companionship. But she might just be telling the truth. People don't make sense anyway.

"Please," she was saying. "Please let me stay. Please don't make me go back to that room."

I knew I was probably letting myself in for something I would regret, but I didn't want to send her off alone to be afraid—even if the danger was nothing more than a lonely dark room. I liked her. That was my trouble.

"Okay." I gestured to the other bed. "It's all yours."

She smiled a vivid smile of gratitude. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Any time, I'm sure."

She kicked off her mules, found the opening in the mosquito netting and climbed into the other bed. I could see her blurred silhouette through the netting, lying on her back, her hair shining against the pillow. It was like a still from an early Von Sternburg movie.

Outside in the jungle, a bird, probably one of those who were waiting for their lovers, groaned lugubriously. I turned off the light.

THERE was darkness and silence. Suddenly she said: "I hate guides. Let's get up early and see the ruins before the tour begins."

"I'm a dope," I said. "I need instruction."

"I know all about it. I'll be your guide."

"Okay."

"You're very kind."

"Aren't I?"

"I'm terribly grateful."

"I'm glad."

For several minutes the silence was unbroken. I heard her sigh and turn

over. Then, in a queer little voice as if she was almost asleep, she murmured: "Birds on the road. Waiting for their lovers."

"Yes," I said.

She mumbled drowsily something that sounded like: "Joan of Arc crowned him in Fourteen-Twenty-eight."

"Crowned who?" I asked.

She sighed again. "My uncle."

"That must have been nice for him."

"It was," she whispered. "A new Joan of Arc. But don't tell anyone. Ever. It's a secret."

"Okay."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Wunnerful. Goo'night, sweet prince, and flights of angels. . . ."

The words turned into a grunt of satisfaction and there was no more gibberish. I was pretty sure then that she was asleep. She was young enough to be able to do that, to fall asleep without care, like an animal. Sometime, not much later, I fell asleep myself.

CHAPTER IV

A HAND on my shoulder awakened me. Clear sunlight splashed through the window. The mosquito netting had been pushed back from my bed. Deborah, in her white pajames, was standing by my side.

"You're awfully hard to wake up," she said. "It's almost seven."

I looked at her, remembered her, and everything about her.

"The ruins," she said. "You promised to get up early before the tour begins."

"All right."

"I'm going back to my room to dress. You'll be ready, won't you?"

"I guess so."

She studied me solemnly. "Are you always this bad-tempered in the morning?"

"Who's room is it?" I asked.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You don't have to rub it in."

She left, strolling casually out of the door as if she didn't care whether she was seen or not. I got up and washed. My sunburn was better. It hardly hurt at all. I had just finished dressing when Deborah came back. She was wearing the silver gray suit and clasped the large red pocketbook under one arm. She looked fresh as the morning.

"Come on," she said. "No one's around yet."

We went out into the garden. I locked the door behind us. The main house, beyond the orange trees and the scarlet and magenta bougainvillea vines, gleamed in the sunlight. The terrace was deserted.

"Let's begin with the big pyramid," she said. "I know this place as if I'd been here. Father's been drumming it into me for years."

We walked to the Inn gates and out into the little road where the cars were parked. Deborah was in exaggeratedly high spirits. I had given up trying to follow her moods.

A few hundred feet down the road the pyramid which we had seen the night before rose massively above the jungle. The menace with which the night had invested it was gone, but the grandeur remained, gray, cold, forbidding. Soon we came to an outcrop of Mayan cottages. Here, too, there were no signs of life except for a yellow, humble-looking dog which glanced sidewise at us and then started sheepishly to follow us.

We went through a gate in the wire fence across harsh, stubbly grass dotted with little yellow flowers. A turn around a clump of bushes brought us directly to the base of the pyramid. Around us, circling the great turfed arena, squatted huge, ruined palaces.

This was not the group I had visited the night before. They had been on the other side of the Inn. Deborah started to point out the individual buildings. The long, massive walls of the Sacred Ball Court, with the Temple of the Tigers humped at one end. The Temple of the Skulls. The Tomb of Chacmool,

the great rain god who had held the destiny of the Mayan race in his sacrifice-hungry hands. And, beyond, the immense Temple of the Warriors, surrounded by the remains of the thousand stone columns which had once housed the market.

Deborah started to explain the mystic connection between the number of platforms and steps of the giant pyramid and the Mayan calendar. I only half-listened, awed by the fact that so pretentious a civilization could have been swallowed so completely by the jungle.

Butterflies of all shapes and colors flickered around us. A huge white heron soared through the blue sky past the Temple of the Warriors and away.

We crossed the Ball Court, the yellow dog cautiously following. We climbed the steep steps to the platform of the Temple of the Tigers and looked down on the long court itself. Its walls were carved with elaborate ritualistic panels. In the center of each wall, high up, was a great stone ring.

THE yellow dog had timidly climbed the steps, too, and stood at a respectful distance, blinking at us and scratching.

We passed on to the Temple of the Warriors, climbing to the top where two huge stone serpents with their tails in the air and their snarling heads pressed against the ground stood sentinel before a stone image of Chacmool himself, who squatted on his haunches, his head turned toward the pyramid, a platter on his lap, ready to receive the sacrificial human heart.

The sensation of evil which had overtaken me the night before began to creep through me again. The walls around us were sculptured with masks of Chacmool's face with the conventionalized nose exaggerated into great hooked probosces which trumpeted out from the stone like an Asiatic nightmare. I was suddenly appalled by the monstrous stupidity of this dead religion, the gloomy perversity of a cult which had raised thousands of babies in cages and fattened them into suitable sacrifices for a blank-eyed god manufactured out of limestone and bad dreams.

The yellow dog appeared around the corner, watched us with flattened ears and then, padding past the serpents, sniffed at Chacmool's stone buttocks and lifted his leg.

I felt a lot better.

Deborah, standing at my side, glanced at her watch. "Let's go to the cenote. Father was cenote expert around here. He'd kill me if I didn't bring back a full report."

We moved toward the great stone sacrificial table. The pretty little yellow flowers were growing around it. I wondered if they'd grown there when the blood dripped from the altar. Maybe they liked blood.

"What are cenotes?" I asked.

"The natural wells they have around here. But this one was the most important in all Yucatan. The sacrificial well. Princes came from miles around to throw in jewels and men and maidens. Particularly maidens. They were always throwing in maidens."

We climbed down, wound through the collapsing columns of the dead market and out into the arena.

"It's north of the pyramid," said Deborah. "Off in the jungle. There. That must be the track."

We crossed the stretch of open country and turned into a narrow path which led into the heart of the jungle. The tangled vegetation seemed violently alive as if it were crouching, gathering strength to rear forward and once again engulf the ruins. Butterflies, huge ones now with sharp orange wings, shot back and forth. An army of warrior ants was marching in precise military formation across the track. We moved deeper into the jungle while birds with metallic-bell laughs screamed around us.

And then the path broadened into a clearing where a crumbling pile of stones marked a destroyed temple. We had reached the Cenote de Los Sacrificios.

To me the sacrificial well was the most sinister of all the old horrors. Perhaps

this was because Nature had made it and yet seemed to have imitated the surly brutality of the Mayan architects.

In front of us stretched a circular crater about one hundred and fifty feet in diameter, a gaping hole as if, at that point, the surface of the world had collapsed. I moved to its brink. Its walls, white, serrated, dotted with ferns and precariously lodged bushes, plunged in a sheer drop of some eighty feet to green, sluggish water.

The sunlight, striking through the overhanging trees, made weird designs of gold and shade. But the atmosphere was one of cold stagnancy and death. I thought of terrified girls, struggling, screaming, being pitched over the precipitous side. I thought of seconds of silence, and then of great splashes.

DEBORAH was standing precariously close to the edge, leaning forward.

"There are skeletons down there, hundreds of them," she said. "Thompson, the archeologist, did some dredging. Gold, jade, amethysts, and skulls, skulls, skulls." She paused. "You can't get out. There's an underground river, a current. If you fell in, if there was no one with a rope, you'd be dead."

"Cheerful prospect."

The yellow dog appeared in the clearing, studied us uneasily, then moved into a clump of shade, sitting down heavily and inspecting its paws. Deborah stepped back from the brink of the crater and opened her large red pocketbook. She looked up at me with sudden annoyance.

"I promised Father I'd take photographs. I felt the bag and thought I had my camera, but it's only a book."

I was looking at the little mound of stones which had been a temple, wondering what witches' Sabbaths had taken place there.

"Peter," She took my arm. I turned to look at her and I had the strange sensation that her face was suddenly false. "Peter, would you run back to the hotel and get it? The camera? It won't take five minutes. I did promise Father."

She fumbled in the bag. "Here's my room key. And—" She took out a small, pocketsize mystery novel with a bright cover. "I was reading this thing in the plane. While you're about it, take it back too. It clutters my bag."

I put the book in my pocket. I took the key. I tried to analyze what it was that had given me that curious feeling of falseness behind her words. It was as if her whole behavior since we left the Inn, seen in retrospect, had been an act, something put on to lead up to this perfectly trivial request.

But her young face with its elegant lines and its fashionable blankness told me nothing.

"I hate to bother you," she said. "I'll explore the cenote. I want to, anyway. Go around. Find the best place for pictures."

"All right." I started back toward the trail.

The dog looked at me, half-rose and then, turning its pale gaze on Deborah, settled back to its paw inspection.

"Don't be long," called Deborah.

"I won't."

I turned back. She was scrambling around the edge of the miasmic Mayan crater, something bright and energetic and Twentieth Century with her scarlet pocketbook and her high, perilous heels.

When I emerged from the jungle track onto the great arena of the ruins, I saw that the life of the day had begun. On the unrestored side of the pyramid, two white-coated Indians were hacking at tall weeds with machetes. A little wandering girl was playing around the base of the Temple of Skulls. And, in the center of the grass patch, moving toward me, was a man in a light gray suit.

As we approached each other, I recognized the manager of the Inn. We met and he greeted me cheerfully.

"Up early, Mr. Duluth."

"We've been looking at the cenote."

"Interesting, isn't it?"

"Very."

The little girl started scrambling up

to the Temple of Skulls. One of the Indians on the pyramid got bored with working and lay down flat on his back with his hat tilted over his eyes.

"I've got to go back to the hotel to get a—" I began.

The words stopped for, from behind us in the jungle, came a woman's high scream.

I stiffened. The manager swung round, staring at the mouth of the track to the cenote.

THE echo of the scream seemed to wander eerily through the jungle. It chilled my spine. And then, even more terrible because it linked up with the evil Mayan fancies in my mind, came another sound—a long, hissing splash.

In a cold panic I started to run toward the jungle path. Over my shoulder I called:

"Miss Brand! She's down there. Alone."

The manager came running behind me. I turned into the path and down it as fast as I could go. Vine tendrils waved around me as if shaken by a demoniac life force within. The butterflies, shining like jewels, floated in front of me. Everything was charged with a sort of alien horror. Visions came of Deborah with her high heels, scrambling around the edge of the crater, scrambling, tripping. . . .

I saw the clearing ahead. I saw the yellow dog squatting on its haunches at the brink of the chasm, its ears cocked, looking down. As I reached it, it gave me an absent glance and snapped at an insect.

"Deborah!" I called.

The manager came panting behind me. We both ran to the edge of the abyss. Far below us the evil green water oozed slowly past on its way down the underground river.

"Deborah!" I called again.

The manager clutched my arm. His grip was so powerful that his fingers seemed to dig to the bone. He was pointing. But I didn't need direction, for I had seen it too.

Eighty feet below us, glistening and gleaming under the water, trailing like some dreadful weed, I could see Deborah's silver hair.

I could catch a vague glimpse of her face too. It was pale, chill, green under the green water.

And she didn't move. She lay there soggily still while the sluggish current tugged at her streaming hair.

CHAPTER V

MY first reaction was anger. "The darn little fool," I thought. "Scrambling around the edge. Didn't she have enough sense—"

Then the full horror of it came to me. She was lying down there under the water without moving. She must have hit her head in the fall. Or perhaps the impact of striking the water from such a height had made her lose consciousness.

I dropped to my knees and started to swing myself down the sheer face of rock. The manager gripped me from behind. His arms were strong as a wrestler's. He jerked me back.

"You can't climb down. No one can."

"But she's drowning."

"You'd only fall. It's eighty feet. We'd have to save you too."

An Indian came running into the clearing. The manager barked Spanish at him. He scuttled away.

"He's bringing a rope," said the manager. "There's a rope on the pyramid. To help people climb. In a moment he'll have it."

He was smaller than I, but he was all muscle and he had taken me by surprise, pinioning my arms behind me in an expert Nelson. We staggered together on the edge of the crater. The yellow dog howled. Maybe one of us trod on it.

As I struggled, not thinking, only reacting instinctively, I could see Deborah below us. She seemed to be sinking. The pale face was more blurred. The stream-

ing hair was a duller silver. And, slowly, she was being dragged by the current closer and closer to the rock wall to be engulfed by the subterranean river beyond.

The manager's voice came to me dimly: "It's no use. I think she's dead already. The body will be carried away down the river."

There was the sound of running feet behind us. The Indian had returned. He held a clumsily coiled length of rope. Its tail stretched out behind him like a giant snake. There was another Indian with him. The manager started shouting in Spanish. The Indians ran with the rope to a place on the edge close above the sinking body. There was a tree. One of the men attached the rope to it and swung himself over the rim of the crater.

I stopped struggling then and the manager released his wrestler's hold. I knew now there was nothing I could do. There never had been. The manager was right. She was probably dead. I tried to make myself accept that unacceptable fact. Below, the body was almost invisible beneath the green slimy water. The Indian, small and lithe as a boy, was swaying down on the rope. The other Indian crouched above, gazing down. Suddenly I didn't want to look. I turned away.

The yellow dog, startled by the violence of my movement, shot me a reproachful glance and padded out of the clearing.

My head was clearer now. I moved around the rim of the crater, searching for Deborah's large red pocketbook. It wasn't there. She must have fallen with it clutched in her hand. I thought of it dropping slowly down, down through the turbid water, an elegant American pocketbook going to join the ancient Indian bracelets and golden gew-gaws.

From the jungle path, I heard the thud of footsteps. In a few seconds, the gangling figure of Bill Halliday appeared. The sunlight slanted down on his hair which was either gray or taffy blond. He hurried toward me. His unaccented face was taut, worried.

"What happened? I was up at the ruins. I heard a scream."

The manager had crossed to the Indian at the head of the rope. He was shouting instructions to the other man below. Halliday started toward them.

I said: "It's Deborah Brand. She fell in."

"Fell in."

"She was going to take a photograph. She sent me for her camera."

Halliday hurried to join the manager. I saw him peer cautiously down. He came back to me. He looked sick. He said in an awed voice:

"She's dead, isn't she? Stunned by the fall. Drowned."

"I think so."

THE red-headed bridegroom had entered the clearing now. And, close after him, padding along at a breathless trot, came Mrs. Snood. So they had all been out there, I thought, visiting the ruins before the official tour. They joined us. Everyone fired questions. To me they were nothing more than a blur of disconnected images. Mrs. Snood's perky face and her shrill green suit, the bridegroom's vivid blue eyes, Halliday's thin, lipless mouth.

The manager joined us. "All of you go back to the Inn, please. There is nothing you can do."

I thought of Deborah as my responsibility. I had brought her there. I protested, but the manager cut in:

"Please, Mr. Duluth. You will only distress yourself."

"It's okay," said Halliday. "We'll take him back with us."

Halliday's hand was firm on my arm. He was guiding me back toward the path. In a way I was relieved to go and not to have to see what the Indian would bring up from that monstrous crater.

The bridegroom went ahead. I followed with Halliday. Mrs. Snood fluttered around us. We crossed the arena of the temples, moved out onto the road and up it to the Inn. Waitresses in fancy native costumes were dawdling in the din-

ing room at the end of the terrace.

Mrs. Snood said: "We might as well eat breakfast. We'll feel better with some food in us."

"No," I said.

"Please, Mr. Duluth. It'll do you good."

"No, thank you."

I left them, hurrying down the path to the cottage. I let myself into my room. It hadn't been made. The bed in which Deborah had slept was still a tumble of sheets under the mosquito netting. A quirkish impulse of conventionality took me. The maid shouldn't be allowed to know Deborah had spent the night here—not now that she was dead. With painstaking neatness I made the second bed and tidied the mosquito netting into a formal balloon above it.

I dropped down on the other bed. I felt in my pocket for a cigarette and brought out the book Deborah had given me. It was a twenty-five cent detective story reprint, "The Wrong Murder," by Craig Rice. I glanced at the bright cover and threw it down on the bedside table. I found a cigarette then, and lit it.

Deborah still seemed to be in the room with me as if she had left a shadow behind her. I remembered her voice last night stubbornly repeating: "Why should I be afraid? Of course I'm not afraid."

But she had been afraid, and now she was dead.

That was the first moment at which I began to wonder. In spite of her denials, there had been a lot of mystery surrounding Deborah Brand when she was alive. Wasn't there mystery in her death, too?

Was it reasonable that a sensible, active girl should have fallen down an abyss in broad daylight, simply trying to find a good place to take a photograph? And, in her fall, she had hit her head and landed unconscious in the water, making death certain. Wasn't it all too much of a coincidence?

I thought of the strange impression of falseness she had given me when she had asked me to get her camera. I wondered if she could have deliberately sent me back to the hotel because she had arranged to meet someone else at the cenote.

BUT if that had been so, why had she taken such pains to persuade me to visit it with her in the first place? And certainly, if there had been someone at the hotel whom she knew, she had been afraid of him or her. She would surely never have arranged a meeting at such a dangerous place as the cenote with someone of whom she had been afraid.

The theory collapsed, and yet a vague feeling of something sinister beyond my grasp remained. I had hardly known Deborah Brand, but she had become real to me. A real young girl with a real fear, who had come to me for protection.

Had I somehow let her down?

There was a tap at the door. I got up and went to open it. Mrs. Snood was standing there with a cup of coffee in her hand. She looked anxious and maternal. She had pinned a spray of bougainvillea to her green suit. It was even less effective than the orchids.

"I brought you a cup of coffee. You're paying for breakfast. You might as well get something out of it."

She bustled into the room, looking around brightly. She was probably wondering whether I had got a better bargain than she. I was grateful for the coffee. I was grateful, too, for her warmhearted impulse.

I sat down on the sofa where Deborah had staged her high-school seduction attempt the night before. Mrs. Snood sat down next to me. She put a small hand on my knee and watched me, half-inquisitively, half-affectionately.

"You were fond of her, weren't you?"

"She was a nice girl."

"But it wasn't more than that? I mean, you hadn't known her before?"

"No."

"The manager came back," she said. "It's no good. He doesn't think they're going to be able to get her out."

I gulped the coffee. It tasted bitter. "No?"

"The current. It dragged her in under the rock."

I put the cup down.

Her hand was still on my knee. "Don't worry about it too much. You couldn't have done anything. Lots of people die."

That trite phrase jarred. I growled: "Sure. There's plenty of other girls down there in the cenote already. What's one more?"

She looked hurt. "I wasn't being callous. It's terrible. I know that. I was only trying to help."

"I know you were," I said, apologetically. "I'm sorry."

"The manager says there are no police out here. You'll have to drive into Merida and make a statement at the police station. You have to make statements for accidents."

"Yes."

She got up. "Like another cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks. That was fine."

"Well, I guess we're going out with the guide after all. It seems kind of awful to be snooping around the ruins after this. But since I've come so far and spent so much—"

"Of course."

The manager, apprehensive and apologetic, as if everything might be blamed on him, came in then. He repeated what Mrs. Snood had already told me and made arrangements for us to drive into Merida after lunch.

The Yucatecan method of reporting accidents is more leisurely than our own. Apparently the Merida police would appreciate the fact that the manager's duties to his guests made it impossible for him to leave the Inn until the afternoon. Mrs. Snood loitered around us, her black eyes darting back and forth. When the manager had left, she said:

"I'll have had enough of this place by lunch time and my plane for Mexico City leaves tomorrow. Mr. Halliday and the honeymoon couple are going back, and the hotel car'll be full. If I get that character out from Merida again, it'll be another fifty pesos. Could you give me a ride?"

"Of course. I'd like your company."

"Thanks."

MRS SNOOD had wandered over to the bedside table and had picked up "Wrong Murder."

"Is this any good?"

"I don't know. It was Deborah's."

"Reading it?"

"No."

"Mind if I take it? I can't sleep without reading. Haven't run into any English books down here."

"Of course. Take it."

Mrs. Snood slipped the book under her arm. She looked at me anxiously.

"You're a nice young man. I like you. I don't want you to be unhappy."

I smiled at her.

"I'll be okay."

"I suppose you don't know of any relatives? I mean—to be informed."

"A father in Peru. An archeologist."

"Where in Peru?"

"I don't know."

"No one else?"

"Not that I know of."

[*Turn Page*]

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"She didn't say where she was going from here?"

"Mexico City. But I don't know if she knew anyone there."

Mrs. Snood shrugged. "Well, it's not our responsibility. I expect the police will be able to trace her. Poor girl. What a dreadful thing." Her natural exuberance got better of her then. "I'll run along. The tour will be starting. I don't want to miss anything."

She hurried out with the little brightly-colored book tucked under her arm.

Alone again, I remembered that Deborah had given me her room key. My suspicion of something wrong was still strong enough to make me curious. I moved out onto the little terrace which fronted the cottage. No one was visible up at the hotel. I let myself into Deborah's room.

Its untidiness touched me. There is something young and optimistic about untidiness. It implies that there will be plenty of time later to straighten things up. The white evening dress she had worn the night before was flung over a chair. The rest of her clothes—there weren't many of them—had been tossed into one of the drawers of a bureau.

The drawer was open. Her toilet things, perfume, cold cream, a brush, were crowded on a vanity. The camera was with them. The airplane fabric suitcase stood at the foot of the unmade bed with some underclothes and stockings dangling out of it.

That was all that was left of her. A few untidy clothes and a suitcase.

I searched the place thoroughly. I found nothing unusual, nothing even that gave a hint as to where she had come from or what she had been planning to do in Mexico City. As I went through her meager possessions I suddenly started to wonder whether Deborah herself had left the room this way or whether it had been ransacked.

There was no way of telling, of course. But my suspicions increased rather than diminished. They stayed with me through the long morning when, for lack of anything better to do, I wandered around the ruins, carefully keeping away from the guided party. They were still with me when the time for the return trip to Merida arrived.

I drove with Mrs. Snood, following the manager and the sight-seeing car. I had expected to find her prattle hard to take, but oddly enough it soothed me. With a sensibility of which I hadn't thought her capable, she made no reference to Deborah.

SHE embarked upon an exhaustive history of her own life, telling me about the late Mr. Snood who had been a real estate man in Newark and about her two daughters. One of them was married to a state official in Albany. The other was a lovely intellectual girl in her last year at Barnard, with a beau who was intellectual too and had sold a short story.

The three cars met again outside the Hotel Yucatan. The honeymoon couple went off into the hotel, but both Halliday and Mrs. Snood wanted to come along to the police station as subsidiary witnesses. We all packed into the manager's car and drove to a large, patio-ed Colonial building which might once have been a palace, but which now housed the Merida police.

We assembled before an important-looking man who sat at a large desk with inkwells. Neither Halliday, Mrs. Snood nor I spoke Spanish. The manager, harried and obviously concerned with the reputation of his hotel, gave his version first.

He then translated my purely factual account of what had happened between Deborah and myself at the cenote. A stenographer took down our statements and typed them up for us to sign. Halliday and Mrs. Snood made shorter statements, corroborating what we had said.

The manager then informed us that the police were going to the Inn immediately and that everything would be done to retrieve the body. He concluded with a formal speech, telling us how sorry he was that our trip had been spoiled and assuring us that an accident

of that sort had never happened before. If the police thought it advisable, the whole cenote would be fenced in. The authorities, he said, appreciated our position as purely accidental witnesses to the tragedy and would not expect us to stay in Merida for any of the necessary legal formalities. Nothing must disturb the schedule of American tourists. It was all over just like that.

To me it seemed a shockingly casual way to have dismissed Deborah. An impulsive desire came to blurt out my amorphous suspicions and demand a further investigation. But the police official was disinterestedly picking his teeth. Mrs. Snood and Halliday were restless, obviously eager to be gone.

I had absolutely nothing that resembled evidence to back up my hunch. Even Deborah herself had constantly denied that she was in danger. Under the circumstances, I had no right to detain the others in Yucatan indefinitely. Besides, I was eager to get my own affairs settled in Mexico City and return to Iris in New York.

When Halliday said: "Well, how about driving back to the hotel? I could do with a drink," I said: "That's okay."

As we went out to the car, I tried to pretend to myself that I had done all that anyone could have reasonably expected me to do. But I wasn't completely convinced. There was still something in me that made me feel I was walking out on Deborah Brand.

CHAPTER VI

OUTSIDE the Hotel Yucatan, the manager of the Inn bade us a relieved good-by and drove away. Mrs. Snood and Halliday went up to their rooms to change. I stopped at the desk to see if there was any mail from my wife. There wasn't, but as the desk clerk handed me my key he said: "I see your friend found you yesterday, sir."

"What friend?"

He nodded toward the stairway up which Mrs. Snood and Halliday had disappeared. "The American gentleman. Mr. Halliday."

"Halliday?" I tried to sound casual. "Was he asking for me yesterday?"

"He arrived from the airport just after you'd left for Chichen with the young lady. He'd seen you driving off and wanted to know where you were going. I told him. You were old friends, he said."

"Oh sure," I said. "Thanks."

I moved away from him along the edge of the lush, tropical patio. Yesterday, when he hadn't known me from Adam, Halliday had inquired about my movements and claimed to be an old friend of mine. At last my suspicions had something definite to go on. Halliday had been at the airport when Deborah arrived from Balboa. He had come to the hotel a few minutes after her and had seen us driving away in my car. Obviously he had been following her from the airport and had used my name to the desk clerk merely as a blind.

This meant surely that Deborah had begged a lift from me in an attempt to escape from him. And, if she had been trying to escape from him, everything that had happened afterward made sense. Deborah had been afraid of every car that came from Merida because she thought Halliday might be in one of them. Later, on the terrace, her fear had reached its climax because she had actually met Halliday face to face.

I dropped down into a wicker chair in front of a wicker table under whose glass top photographs of the Chichen Itzá ruins were displayed. One of the waiters turned on the radio and a blare of *danzon* came. If Deborah's fear of Halliday had been an ordinary fear, if, for example, she had been running away from home, and Halliday had been a friend of her father's sent to bring her back, the whole problem would have resolved itself there on the terrace of the Mayan Inn. But the fact that they had both pretended not to know each other

showed that the situation had been far more complex and, probably, far more dangerous than that.

I remembered the figure crouching under Deborah's window. Had it been Halliday? And had Deborah been so eager to spend the night with me because she was afraid of what Halliday might have done to her, alone and defenseless in her own room? If that were so, although she hadn't trusted me enough to confide in me, she had clung to me for protection. And the moment she had been left without me, she had died.

A fat little Mexican girl in a pink dress slumped into a chair beyond me, dangled bare legs and ordered a bottle of soda which she sucked noisily through a straw.

The whole picture was ominously different now.

I heard American voices. I looked up. Halliday and Mrs. Snood were coming down the broad tiled staircase together.

They joined me at the table. Mrs. Snood summoned a waiter and ordered drinks for all of us. She swayed unrhythmically to the radio.

"I'm crazy about the rumba. Took a course in it once. Five dollars an hour. They fleeced me. Never got my derrière operating properly."

HALLIDAY was sitting immediately opposite me. He was still wearing the nondescript sports coat with a white shirt open at the throat. Behind the shell-rimmed glasses, his pale eyes were without expression. He was smiling his dimpled, almost fatuous smile. In spite of my suspicions, it was impossible to think of him as sinister.

"They sure go for the rumba down here," he remarked. "Can't turn on the radio without rumba, rumba, rumba."

Looking at him, I said: "At the desk they told me you were making inquiries about me yesterday."

Halliday's reaction was perfectly in character. His face lit up with a raconteur's delight at an unexpected chance to hold the floor.

"Why, yes. What d'you know? Completely slipped my mind. It's the craziest thing." He leaned forward and tapped Mrs. Snood's knee. "This'll interest you, Lena. Yesterday I'd just arrived in this car they send to the airport and I saw Peter driving off in a blue sedan. Just got a glimpse of his profile. I could have sworn it was an old pal of mine. Johnny Ross. In the advertising business in Cleveland. Quite a boy, Johnny. Wonderful after-dinner speaker. Known him for years. I asked at the desk where the blue sedan was headed and, when they said Chichen, I was expecting to meet up with old Johnny out there." He turned to me: "Ever run across him? Johnny Ross? With Pierce, Dolan and Styles?"

"No," I said.

He studied me soberly. "When you come to look, there's not much of a resemblance. Just a trick, I guess, seeing your profile in the car. I could have sworn—"

"It's funny," broke in Mrs. Snood. "All the time I keep thinking I see people I know, too. Why, down in Guatamala City in the market—they have the cutest market—there was this American woman. Blonde, about thirty. Until she turned around, I could have sworn—"

Mrs. Snood was launched. The waiter brought the drinks. Halliday smacked his lips over his, saying: "Boy, is this going to hit the spot?"

The whole thing had been glossed over.

Halliday's explanation had been so glib that I might almost have accepted it. But I didn't because I no longer quite believed in the vapid businessman front. It was a little too well-done. And, now that I had started to look for it, there was an intelligence behind the ambiguous eyes which he wasn't able to conceal. I thought I could trace a wariness, too, beneath the casual, sloppy manner. I was sure then that, whether it did or did not connect with Deborah Brand, Bill Halliday was posing as something he wasn't.

And, as we went on drinking and talk-

ing, I began also to have the uneasy feeling that he was keeping me under unobtrusive but constant observation. It was as if, with that one remark of mine, the relationship between us had completely changed. We were entering, as it were, the second round. Though what the first round had been or what the second round was going to be, I hadn't the slightest idea.

We were all leaving for Mexico City the next day. Mrs. Snood and Halliday went with me when I returned my rented car to the garage, and we turned in early. Halliday was the first person I saw the next morning. His tap on the door waked me. I let him in. He was dressed in a gray suit with a vague necktie. Although he was tidied up for the flight, he still looked completely nondescript. He was carrying a brown gabardine bag like mine.

"Better make it snappy, Peter," he said. "Mrs. Snood's already downstairs eating breakfast. The honeymoon couple too." He glanced casually around the room. "Want me to help you pack?"

"No, thanks. You go down. I'll be right with you."

I DRESSED, packed my bag and descended to the dining room. The redheaded bridegroom nodded to me. The pretty bride with her great swimming eyes smiled. I joined Halliday and Mrs. Snood. By the time we had finished breakfast and paid our bills, the car from the airport had arrived.

There are, as yet, no roads to link Yucatan with the rest of Mexico. The airport, therefore, is the focus of all traffic. But that day it was relatively deserted. There were only a handful of other passengers in the four-motor plane to Mexico City. Mrs. Snood insisted that we be chummy, and we settled together in a seat for three.

Sleep had not dispelled my doubts about Deborah's death. Nor had it altered my conviction that Halliday had been connected at least with her fear, and was now unhealthily concerned with me. As the plane droned over languid jungle and Mrs. Snood chattered, the closeness of his knee to mine became oppressive.

I would have been more comfortable if there had been something definite against him other than my own distrust. I could have done something then. As it was, there was nothing except that one slim fact of his having inquired about me at the desk.

His behavior was completely normal. He slouched, smoked and kidded Mrs. Snood who was reading Deborah's detective story, and told long, dull stories about dull friends in Ohio.

But whether I was inventing the mystery around him or whether it in fact existed, I was sick and tired of him. I was even getting tired of the poor, pale ghost of Deborah Brand. Why should I worry about her? She hadn't trusted me. I was only someone with a car to drive her to Chichen, and a bedroom to keep her safe from—what?

My one desire was to reach Mexico City and be rid of them all, particularly Halliday.

But when we landed, it was Halliday himself who seemed to be eager to get away. The moment our bags came through, he picked his up and wandered off through the crowd.

Mrs. Snood, fussing around her own bags, murmured: "Nice man. Funny, though, did you notice? He never told us what he did. And, come to think of it, he never gave us his address here in town. Did he give it to you?"

"No," I said.

She had assembled her luggage and was supervising a porter. "By the way" —she smiled her sudden, infectious smile—"we won't lose touch, will we? I mean, back in the States, you won't be too high and mighty to come out to Newark?"

"Of course not."

The bride and groom went by and waved. Mrs. Snood waved back.

"I'll give you the address right now while I think of it."

She started to fumble in her bag. "Oh, I never have a pencil."

"I've got one in my suitcase."

I bent and unzippered the gabardine bag at my feet. As it opened, it revealed an untidily folded sports coat. I pushed the coat aside and saw gray flannel trousers, a dirty yellow shirt, an unfamiliar pair of shoes. I realized at once that it wasn't my bag. It was Halliday's.

Without waiting to close its zipper, I grabbed it up and, murmuring: "I'll be back," to Mrs. Snood, started running toward the entrance of the airport. Taxis were parked outside on the gravel. I was just in time to see Halliday climbing into one.

I hurried to the taxi and pushed my head through the window. "Hey, Halliday, you've got my bag!"

He smiled back blandly. "Well, what'd' you know? Is that a fact?"

I opened the taxi door and showed him the bag. He blinked at its contents. "Boy, you're right. Lucky you found out in time." He picked my bag up from the seat next to him and handed it to me. "I noticed this morning yours was like mine. Darn sloppy, these porters."

"So it seems."

There was no way I could prove he had hurried off with my bag on purpose. Nor did I have any idea why he should have wanted to make a switch. I stood by the open taxi door, looking at him. He looked back. Then he smiled his meaningless, dimpled smile.

"Well, so long, Peter. See you."

"See you."

He spoke to the driver. The taxi started away.

I stood watching it go, wondering.

CHAPTER VII

HAILING a taxi, I drove to the apartment on Calle Londres where Iris and I had spent the fall. That quiet neighborhood of stately European mansions and formal shade trees was pleasantly familiar. There was a letter from my wife, saying that Hollywood was depressing, that the movie which was almost finished, was moronic, and that she missed me.

She asked if I could join her in New York on a date three days ahead, and talked enthusiastically about my play. The sight of her handwriting and the thought of seeing her sooner than I expected brought warmth and a reminder that my real life belonged in the States. Deborah began to fade. And Mrs. Snood. And Halliday.

I went to the airport office and had my reservation to New York changed to Monday. That gave me two and a half days in Mexico City—which was more than enough for me. I sent Iris a delighted cable. I returned home and telephoned the real estate office which handled the apartment and told them to try to get a sublease for the remaining two months.

I spent the rest of the day comfortably alone. The thought of Halliday did come back when I unpacked my suitcase. I looked at its innocent contents spread out on the bed and decided that, unless he had liked my clothes better than his own, there was no conceivable reason why he should have switched bags on purpose.

Now that he wasn't visible, the sinister atmosphere with which I had invested him dissipated. He'd just been a bore and Deborah had just been a girl with a flair for the dramatic who had died. I went to bed and started thinking about production problems on the play. When I awoke next morning, Yucatan was a thing of the past.

Without Iris, I didn't bother to eat at home. Around ten I went out for breakfast. The clear mountain sunlight dappled the sidewalk. A handsome new station wagon coupe was parked down the street. A woman came by from the market carrying a huge bunch of calla lilies. Two yellow butterflies flapped after her, caught up with the moving lilies, fell off and flapped on again in angry pursuit. An Indian was going barefoot from door to door selling long-handled brooms with feather heads. It

was just an ordinary Mexican morning.

Across the street from me, a boy in denims lounged against a tree trunk, smoking a cigarette. He was small quiet. A burlap sack was slung over his shoulder and he had a newspaper under his arm. As I passed, he glanced at me incuriously from large eyes, brown and liquid as melted chocolate. Although I had never consciously seen him before, his face seemed elusively familiar. The eyes I knew, and the full lower lip and the dark, passive beauty of feature that seemed more vegetable than animal. Pretty. Like a young flower.

I tried to track down the familiarity. It was probably nothing more than the fact that his was the prototype of the Indian face, enigmatic, waiting. Or did it link up with some picture I'd seen? A Covarrubias? The problem nagged at me for a few moments the way half-recollections do. Then, because I was hungry, it slid out of my mind.

I had adopted the Mexican habit of breakfasting on coffee and sweet bread. There was a *pasteleria* which I patronized a couple of blocks away. When I reached it, I found that tall stylized skeletons had been painted in yellow across the plate glass windows. Under the bony, beckoning arm of one of them had been written: *"Hay pan de los muertos."*

THE bread of the dead itself was heaped in the window and alongside of it was a neat pyramid of little candy skulls with red luminous paper eye-sockets. Pink curlicues of sugar wreathed their craniums. There were larger skulls, too. These had individual names written in sugar across their frontal bones: Carlos, Arturo, Guadalupe, Carmen.

I had not realized that it was the date on which Mexico celebrates its annual fiesta for the dead. While I lingered at the door of the *pasteleria,* a small boy came out, licking the jaw bone of a skull. A woman followed with a loaf of the bread of the dead in a wicker basket. It was round like a coffee-cake and studded with crystalized sugar.

On Hallowe'en Americans are apt to get drunk at raucous parties while their children play with pumpkin heads. Mexicans spend the day eating candy skulls and little candy corpses in candy coffins and taking loaves of sweet bread to their dead relatives in the cemeteries. Their custom, if more macabre, is also more imaginative. But that day I found the mixture of sardonic humor and hopeless denial of life, symbolized by the candy skulls, depressing. A faint gloom descended on me. The sunlight seemed flat. I began wondering if my play was as good as Iris thought it was.

I glanced back down the street. The boy with the burlap sack and the beautiful blank eyes was strolling behind me.

I went into the *pasteleria* and had a glass of coffee with hot milk and a couple of slices of the bread of the dead. It tasted pleasant, sweet. I thought of Mexicans all over the country offering it on the flower-strewn graves of their "dear departed." The habit showed a touching courtesy to remembered friends and relatives. It was practical, too, because later when the buried had shown themselves indifferent to the light fingers of bakers the family returned and ate the bread themselves.

A girl came into the *pasteleria,* took the stool next to me and ordered in rapid, voluble Spanish. I glanced at her and then looked back again quickly because she was so completely unlike the sort of girl who would be having breakfast in a small Mexican *pasteleria.*

She was Slavic, probably Paris White Russian. I was almost sure of that from the broad cheek bones, the milk-white skin and the huge violet-blue eyes with lashes that might have been braided out of black wool. She was wearing a perfectly matched silver fox cape over a black suit with handsome lines. But there were too many pearls, and a frou-frou of fur around one wrist made the whole effect rather corny.

There was even a fur Cossack cap on her glossy black hair and her perfume was so heavy I expected it to drop to the

floor with a thud. Her legs, however, in sheer nylons, were beautiful, long and slender, with the firmness of a ballet dancer's legs.

In fact, she looked like a ballet dancer. I knew the type well in New York, exotic creatures with the brains of orchids who squabble cliqueishly in the Russian tea-room and drink sweet cordials in the bar at the Met while they pan each other's performances.

Like most ballet dancers too, she had a terrific appetite. She was eating her way into her third pastry when I paid my check. She glanced at me once out of the corner of a large, bright eye. It was a completely female glance which said: "I'm a girl. You're a man."

She was still eating when I left.

As I emerged onto the street, the boy with the burlap sack was lounging on the corner opposite, gazing indifferently at nothing. I began to wonder about him.

I HAD nothing particular to do that morning. I went down a side street toward the Avenida Chapultepec. I turned sharp right and then sharp left and waited on a corner. In a few minutes the boy came into view again, strolling down the other sidewalk.

If you are an American, and therefore automatically a millionaire, it is not unusual to be followed for blocks in Mexico by someone who wants to sell a silver watch chain or maybe a handbag with a reproachful-looking baby alligator attached to its side. But this boy had made no attempt to accost me, and that aroused my suspicious curiosity. He had stopped in the middle of the block.

I went back toward him. He didn't move. I reached him and said:

"Want something?"

He hardly came up to my shoulder. His spotless denims were a weak blue from many washings. He didn't look more than fifteen or sixteen, although he was certainly older. He was beautiful the way so many Indian boys are—like a girl, but tough too.

He shrugged.

I repeated: "Want something?"

Still watching me from dark, wooden eyes, he flicked the newspaper from under his arm and opened it. In the V at the bottom of the paper, I saw a few shabby postcards of plump females dressed only in stockings with a flouncy, rosetted garter. I grinned and said:

"*No quiero* filthy pictures."

He shut the paper again and put it back under his arm. He looked away from me but made no attempt to move. A family group, all dressed in black and all carrying large bunches of orange marigolds which are the traditional flowers of the dead, marched lugubriously past toward the Chapultepec trolley on their way to the cemetery.

I thought it might be interesting to go out to the cemetery myself and see what happened there on the Day of the Dead. As I turned to leave the boy, he changed his position, leaning against a street light in a way that made his right hip jut out under the slung sack. The sunlight gleamed on a small area of metal which protruded from his pants pocket. I recognized it as the handle of a revolver.

I started to wonder. Young Mexicans in old denims don't carry guns. Guns are a luxury there. Even a knife is a major investment. Something, maybe the vague recollection he had stirred or maybe a hangover of uneasiness from Yucatan, made me think of Halliday. In any case, I didn't want to hang around a little boy with a gun.

I left him, going down side streets toward the Avenida Chapultepec. I reached it. A couple of blocks in front of me was the trolley stop. A crowd of Mexicans, all carrying orange flowers or gay rush baskets stuffed with food, were waiting for the *tren*.

Once I had reached them, I looked over my shoulder. The boy with the empty sack had turned the corner and was moving stubbornly after me.

At that moment, a battered yellow trolley came rattling down the tracks and pullel up with a jolt. It was already twice as crowded as any New York

crosstown bus in the rush hour. I let the throng on the street jostle me deep into the mass of humanity inside.

The timing had been good. While the boy was still half a block away, the trolley started forward. I was squashed against one window and I caught a glimpse of him as we trundled down the track.

HIS inertia had completely gone. He was peering anxiously up and down the street.

I knew then that the anatomical photographs had been an alibi. He was following me for some more important reason. Probably because he had been hired to follow me. My thoughts of Halliday grew. Had he, in fact, been the sinister figure I had half suspected him of being? Had he tried to steal my suitcase on purpose? Was he now having me followed by a boy with a gun?

I didn't care. I had already bowed out of the affaire Deborah Brand and I only had a couple more days in Mexico. So long as they didn't start using guns, any boy could tote one and follow me all he wanted. But I felt curious and angry too. I didn't like the indignity of having to duck into a crowded trolley to escape from a pretty little boy with a face like a flower.

Although I had shaken him off, and although I told myself I wasn't interested, some of the old Yucatan feeling was alive again. The unfamiliar quality of my trolley companions gave it added emphasis. Orange flowers of the dead with their tart, autumn scent, were pushed against my face.

An old woman, who looked more than eighty, with a black *rebozo* over her head, was clinging to the handrail next to me and muttering an incessant stream of *aves*. Somewhere, deeper in the hot mass of bodies, someone was strumming a guitar and singing a gay ranchero song. Religious gloom and fiesta raucousness were evenly matched. The air reeked of beer and garlic and flowers and sweat.

As the trolley clattered forward, people catapulted against me—the old lady, her *aves* uninterrupted, a girl with knee-deep lipstick and an American sweater, a studious young man who managed, with a concentration I admired, to go on reading a medical textbook illustrated with drawings of livers and kidneys.

Every now and then there was a shout of *"bajando."* The trolley jerked to a halt. A spasm, which reminded me of a worm turning over in a box of bait, ran through the crowd. Someone somehow managed to get out.

I made no attempt to do anything until we reached the end of the line. I was hurtled out with the rest of the passengers. I hadn't seen the destination of the trolley when I boarded it. But, as I suspected, I had arrived at the Pantheon Dolores, the largest cemetery in Mexico City.

All the Latin-American world seemed to be concentrated on the terraced sidewalk outside the main gates. Indians squatted in the street beside huge piles of orange and purple flowers. Behind them, improvised wooden stalls were selling fruits, tacos, great hunks of roast meat, finicky colored jellies and live chickens. Furtive dogs darted in and out.

A radio screamed from a beer parlor. Behind, revolving slowly against a clear blue sky, was a Ferris wheel with a carnival ground at its base. As always, Mexico was mixing life and death so inextricably together that one could hardly tell which was which.

I had forgotten the boy and was beginning to enjoy myself. I joined the crowd filing toward the high iron cemetery gates. A band of traveling musicians in musical comedy costumes moved past. We reached a canopied stand which sold religious images and candy. Beyond it, on the street, squatted a group of denim-clad Mexicans selling birds in cages.

As I passed, something in the smooth curve of the cheek of one of the men attracted my attention. He moved his head a little and I saw the dark, flower-like profile. It was against all reason,

but there was no doubt about it.

My boy-friend from the Avenida Chapultepec was squatting there among the bird cages.

One of the birds started to sing, a sweet, springlike sound in the babel.

The boy turned and looked straight at me. Long black lashes dropped demurely. My annoyance came back. So did my curiosity. The bird was still singing.

The boy put his hand in his pants' pocket.

CHAPTER VIII

THE only way the boy could have beaten the trolley to the Pantheon was by car. No Mexican boy in denims owns a car. He's lucky if he owns a second pair of denims. Unless he has been hired by someone else he certainly hasn't the price of a taxi fare. The enigmatic shadow of Bill Halliday seemed close.

I played with the idea of pushing through the bird cages, giving the boy a sound spanking and sending him home. The gun didn't bother me in this public place. And he was small enough to be thrown over my knee with one hand. That would probably have been the smartest thing to do. But I didn't feel smart. I felt curious.

The knowledge that I had so short a time left in Mexico made me feel casual about the whole affair. If he wanted to follow me, okay. I was interested in knowing what he was after.

The boy was ignoring me. That was his brilliant idea of how to be a good shadow. "Don't look at a guy and he doesn't know you are there." I let him think I hadn't noticed him and drifted with the celebrants of the Day of the Dead toward the cemetery gates.

In spite of myself, I was starting to think about Deborah Brand as I had thought of her in Yucatan—a frightened kid flying from some danger into a trap. If there was something in the boy's following me, then there had been something in my theory about Deborah.

She had been a fugitive.

Were they trying to make a fugitive of me, too?

At the gates, policemen were confiscating all food brought by the Indians and were checking it in a roped enclosure. The Department of Public Health must have passed an unimaginative law against feeding the dead. I moved inside.

The front area of the cemetery was chill and formal, with bombastic memorials to national heroes. A few tired flowers had been scattered on their illustrious tombs, but there they were receiving little attention. Everyone was streaming past to greet his own particular cherished corpse.

Behind the monuments the cemetery stretched as far as the eye could see. Under quiet shade trees and flowering oleanders, thousands of modest graves drowsed in the early sunlight. The mild air smelt of dead leaves and sadness. But there was none of the cloistered serenity of a New England cemetery. The place was quivering with activity, loud with human voices and garish with flowers.

I started down one of the broad paths. A cement hole, like an open grave, at the path's edge was filled with dirty water. A woman with a scarlet shawl and long Indian pigtails scooped out water in a kerosene can and splashed it over a nearby grave. A man, with a cigarette drooping from his lips, was repainting a name on a wooden cross. They worked in a casual, humdrum manner, just as they would have worked around their own houses.

I knew the boy was still following me, the way you do know those things, as if there was some area of sensitivity at the back of my neck. I didn't look around, but I played with the question: Why?

If Halliday was behind this, what did he want from me? If he had murdered Deborah, obviously she had been carrying something he wanted, some actual object or some information. Maybe,

after they'd killed her, they hadn't found it. Maybe, because I'd been with her, they thought I was her associate. Maybe they even thought she had given me this hypothetic thing.

I KNEW I wasn't her associate and I knew she hadn't given me anything except a twenty-five-cent detective story. Murders weren't committed for the ownership of a book. But Halliday hadn't known that she'd given me nothing, and he hadn't known either that the red pocketbook had sunk with Deborah in the cenote.

Maybe he thought I'd picked it up and taken the "thing"—whatever it was—that had been in it. I thought of Deborah's room key, too. She'd given it to me.

If Halliday knew that, there was a pretty good reason for him to consider me as a highly implicated character.

There was quite a lot of angles to this. My interest was growing.

With Mexican patience, a woman was decorating a little picket-fence around a grave with pink carnations, snipping off individual heads and tying them to each upright.

I glanced over my shoulder. The boy in demins was padding leisurely after me. He still carried the burlap sack over his shoulder but he had discarded the newspaper. In its place he was carrying an empty bird cage. I wondered whether the cage was another of his world-shattering ideas for camouflage, or whether he had just happened to need one and had seized the opportunity to buy it. He was beginning to get on my nerves. The pursuit was so brazen. I started to think of the gun.

And the sack, too. Somehow I didn't like the sack.

I had reached a little square in which stood a stone building with a staircase winding up its façade. A path led through the graves to a door in the building's side. A slat was broken out of the door and a girl was stooping down peering into the interior.

My gaze settled on her in surprised recognition. Even from the back there was no mistaking those molded ballet legs, the silver fox cape and the tall Cossack cap.

As I approached, she straightened from her inspection of the building's interior and came down the path toward me. We met. The black wool lashes batted over her eyes. Then she looked at me again, and a great warm smile broke her face.

"Ah, already I see you," she said in English. Her voice was rich and heavy as a Russian cigarette. "You are the man in the cake place. You eat the dead bread, yes?"

"Yes," I said. "I noticed you, too."

She was as pleasant a thing as anyone could want to meet in a cemetery. I saw I could use her too. It would at least be a precautionary measure to confuse my hanger-on by acquiring a companion.

She brandished the arm with the fur circlet, indicating the cemetery as a whole. "You like it? Graves. Flowers. Corpses. Quaint, no? Pictureful."

"Very."

She pointed at the door through which she had been peering. "I look inside. There is a great slab. A door with hinges. I think it is—how you say?—crematoria. Slide in the corpse. Pouff. Burns him up." She sighed. "You look. You think: 'One day she comes to me too.' Death. So sad."

She couldn't have looked more alive. I had never seen anyone so burstingly full of vitality and vitamins.

I said: "There's the Russian coming out in you."

The great eyes rolled. "You tell I am Russian? How you tell?"

"How can I tell the Kremlin's Russian?"

She laughed and it was like a bell ringing in a Rimski-Korsakov opera. "Ah, so you think this of me? I am the big old tired Russain monument."

SHE was young and very luscious, and she knew it. That, I thought, was why she laughed. Because it was nice to

be young and beautiful and pretend to be crazy about death.

I didn't have to encourage her to stay with me. Completely unselfconscious, she slipped her hand through my arm and suggested:

"You come with me, yes? To be alone I hate. Bored, bored, bored, all the time bored. Together we see the pretty people fix their tombs."

The silver fox cape brushed against my shoulder. It reeked of tuberoses. I glanced back. The boy with the sack and the bird cage was still stubbornly following.

A large family, dressed in deepest mourning, was collected stiffly around a very small grave. Near them, a lonely woman was kneeling in front of a grave where four white candles, decorated with white satin ribbons, gleamed palely in the sunlight.

The girl leaned closer against me and her red lips parted in a ripe smile.

"You tell me your name? It is fool to walk with the man and not to know the name."

"I'm Peter Duluth."

"And me. I'm Vera Garcia."

"A Spanish name."

"Only my husband." She gesticulated with the furry arm. "I am ballet dancer. A great artiste of the ballet. The critics they say that I work, work, work and become more better than this Markova and this Danilova. I am much younger than these old women."

So my diagnosis of her profession was right. I wondered if there ever had been a young ballerina who wasn't a thousand times better than all the great stars rolled together?

"I guess Mr. Hurok's just pestering you with cables," I said.

"Me? Pester me?" Her eyes flashed. "He had better not to try. The ballet—by me it stinks. All the time the foot on the bar, up in the air, up on the toe, down. Tired, always tired." She slouched her shoulders to indicate extereme exhaustion. "No fun." Her face lighted. "Two years ago, we come here, the ballet, to Mexico. And here is this man. This politico. He is old, old and rich. So rich! And he wishes me for his wife. He gives me everything, he says. The house here, the house in Acapulco." She shrugged. "The dance? The critics? I should worry me of the criticis. I marry."

Two small, very dirty children, were playing tag around a group of graves and one of them let out with a piercing: "Hyoh Silvaire!" Vera Garcia's eyes were darting everywhere, not missing a trick.

I said: "And you're happy with your old husband?"

"Happy? All the time I am happy, happy."

"He's good to you?"

"He is dead. Three months from the marriage, he dies. Pouff. From oldness." She nuzzled against me. "Now I am a widow. And rich, rich. The rich widow."

"That's cozy," I said.

"Cozy?" She reflected. "What is this, cozy?"

"Nice." I said.

She nodded naive agreement. "Yes, very nice." She pointed crudely with her thumb over her silver-foxed shoulder toward the area of elegant tombs. "Today I bring flowers to the grave of the poor old man. Over there it is. The great marble thing with an angel. Many, many tuberoses I bring, and lilies. I pile them on the grave. Pretty? So pretty. You think he smell the flowers, that poor old man? Always he hate it, the smell of tuberoses and lilies."

UNINHIBITED joy of life poured out of her like heat from a fire. She was a wonderful remedy for the gloom of the cemetery.

But she didn't solve the problem of Junior with the light blue jeans. Now I had something better to do. He was beginning to pall. Every now and then, as unobtrusively as possible, I glanced behind us. He was still following. Once when I looked, Vera, imitative as a monkey, looked back too. Several minutes later when I paused, ostensibly to study a grave, she said suddenly:

"You worry, yes? All the time, he

comes after us, this boy with the cage of the bird."

I was surprised at her acuteness. I wasn't going to confide what little I knew of the truth to her, but I could hardly deny a pursuit as obvious as his.

"Seems that way," I said.

"Ah, these Mexicans." The gray-black eyes flashed ominously. "I fix."

She swirled around and swept toward the boy. When she reached him, she poured out a flow of words from which he visibly cowered. Once he waved the bird cage half-heartedly but Vera Garcia shook her fist at him with Russian abandon and he turned tail, scurrying away through the graves.

She came back to me, her high bosom falling and rising with indignation. "The cage of the bird!" she exclaimed. "He say he follow us to sell the cage of the bird. What are we, I ask? Two parrots that we need the cage of the bird?" She linked her arm through mine, throwing up her ravishing smile. "When I am mad, I am terrible. I scare him. He is frightened, frightened."

I was impressed by her show of ferocity, but I didn't, for a moment, imagine that I'd seen the last of Junior.

For a while we wandered through the graves and then suddenly she said:

"Of the dead I am bored. From here I go to Los Remedios. To the shrine of the Lady of the Miracles. Every year I go to ask for the poor old man my husband a beautiful angel in heaven. Outside I have the car. You come, yes? Together to the Shrine of the Remedies."

That seemed to me like an excellent idea. Once again it killed two birds. I'd see more of Vera and, if I handled the exit from the cemetery satisfactorily, I should see the end of Junior.

I guided Vera down a narrow, shrub-lined path back toward the main gates. If possible, she talked more than Mrs. Snood, and as we strolled, she was lost in a flow of weird, emphatic English. When we reached the open arena around the Monument of Heroes, I kept my eyes peeled for Junior. But he was nowhere in sight.

There was still no sign of him as I eased Vera out into the anonymous crowd beyond the cemetery gates. We wended our way through flowers and pigs and beer parlors to Vera's parked car. It was a glossy new station wagon coupe and I remembered that I had noticed it parked that morning on the Calle Londres. Just as she was climbing in, Vera Garcia saw the Ferris wheel in the carnival ground.

"Oh, the big wheel! I am crazy for the big wheel. Up, up in the air. We go to the wheel? We—" The great lashes dropped piously. "No. Comes first the poor old man, my husband."

SHE backed recklessly and headed the station wagon away through a complication of babies and dogs. I kept down low in my seat but before we left, I glanced back.

There was no sign of Junior.

I felt relief and an exaggerated affection for my new friend. She was just what I had thought her—a feather-pated ballerina, but she wasn't spoiled. In spite of the frou-frou there was a rustic solidity. She was as fresh and appetizing as a glass of raw milk begged at a farmhouse door.

Once out on the main highway she drove with suicidal abandon through the barren countryside where gray, dusty mountains edged the horizon. I listened contentedly to her babble of chatter until at length a great bleak church loomed on a hill. In front of it, supported on a high stone column, was a huge painted crown.

"Ah, the crown of the Lady of Los Remedios," said she. "Already we are here. I make the good time, no? I drive the car well, yes?"

"Like a jet propulsion plane," I said.

She asked: "What is it, this jet-propulsion?"

"Fast," I said.

Although I had never visited Los Remedios, I'd heard about it. It is one of Mexico's most revered shrines. Vera parked on the outskirts of the inevitable market and we moved into the spacious

church square. Indians were streaming into the huge cathedral through piles of pottery and heaped sizzling spareribs. The squeaky sound of a reed organ trailed out, warring with the juke boxes on the market.

We went into the church which was tall and penumbrous, with a foam of flowers at the altar. No service was in progress, but the church was crowded. All the benches were occupied. Groups of men, women and children knelt in the aisle, lost in prayer or staring, wide-eyed, at richly clad saints in candlelit niches.

Vera García whispered: "The shrine is in the back."

We went down the aisle and through an archway into a chamber beyond. It was vivid with the costumes of Indian pilgrims from all states. They were crowding, waiting their turn, at the foot of a stone stairway which led up to the shrine which contained the little miraculous figure of the Lady. The figure is believed to have come from Spain with Cortes and its subsequent history, colored by legend, has built up for it a mighty reputation of power.

On the walls were hundreds of naive paintings which had been sent in gratitude by the recipients of miracles. They showed the accidents or diseases which the Lady had mercifully neutralized, bloody automobile crashes, green, sickly babies in cribs, gaunt cripples with crutches.

"I go to say please for the poor old man," breathed Vera. She smiled her dazzling secular smile, then proceeded reverently to take her place in the line of waiting pilgrims.

An open door beyond showed an iron balcony which looked down on a sun-splashed patio. There was I knew, a disused Franciscan convent attached to the back of the church. Leaving Vera to her devotions, I stepped out onto the balcony.

A PASSAGE led into the convent. No one was there. The massive, deserted solitude was pleasant. I went idly down the passage. It turned twice with empty, cell-like chambers on either side. I came to a great nail-studded door which looked Moorish. It was half-open. I went through it.

I found myself in a large storeroom filled with ecclesiastical objects which had either been discarded or were waiting to be repaired. Old confessionals, benches, dark somber canvases and broken plaster saints were huddled dustily together.

Sunlight slid through a high barred window. A fly droned lazily.

I paused to inspect a three-foot plaster figure of a monk which stood on an old refectory table close to the door. I didn't know who he was. But he had real hair and a real cassock of coarse brown cloth. One of his arms had been broken off, perhaps by revolutionary soldiers, or perhaps by the carelessness of a dusting woman.

The other arm was stretched toward me as if in benediction.

I stooped to study the monk's hand. As I did, I was conscious of a faint sound behind me. I turned. Instantly there was a glitter of metal in the sunlight and, before I could straighten, I felt the violent impact of a sharp blow on my temple.

I staggered. But I could still see. For a split second of exaggerated clarity, I gazed at the figure of a boy in denims, young, pretty, like a flower. His eyes, watching me, were as expressionless as an image's.

He was holding a revolver by its muzzle. Under his other was something else. What was it?

A sack? A burlap sack?

I tried to step toward him, but everything started to blur. I twisted back in an attempt to cling to the refectory table for support. My hand groped and missed.

I was dimly conscious and aware of the plaster monk's arm thrust out toward me with its dead plaster fingers. I felt myself falling.

Then everything went hazy and I blacked out.

CHAPTER IX

SUNLIGHT on my lids, pain in my head and coldness—I was conscious of those things I opened my eyes. Above me lomed the figure of the monk, bizarre from that angle with his doll's robe and his snapped-off arm. He helped me remember. I thought of the boy's flat uninterested gaze, the gleaming revolver and the blow.

I lifted a hand to my sore temple. My fingers traced a swelling. It didn't seem to be anything worse than a bruise. But as my arm crossed my field of vision, I stared at it stupidly. It was bare. I half lifted my head, looking down at my body. I understood the coldness then.

Except for my shorts, I was completely naked.

I got up unsteadily from the dank stone floor. I shook my head, trying to clear it. I thought of the burlap sack. So that was what it had been for. Junior had been following me all morning for a chance to steal my clothes. He, like Halliday, seemed to take me for the glass of fashion and the mold of form.

"Gee, that's a good-looking suit. Let's sock him and own one like it."

Black rage rose up in me. I was mad at myself for underestimating Junior's talents as a shadow. I was even madder at the humilation of being abandoned naked, in a Franciscan convent.

I looked around for something to put on. There was nothing. Only the benches, the carved confessionals, the indifferent plaster figures and the shaft of sunlight from the high barred window. Then I remembered that my plane ticket, my tourist card and about eight hundred pesos had been in my wallet. I swore under my breath.

And then, as I stepped away from the refectory table, my bare foot struck against something. I looked down. My wallet was lying on the stone floor under the doll monk.

I stooped and grabbed it up. I searched throught it. Its contents were intact. The tourist card, the plane ticket, the money were all there.

For a moment I felt relief and nothing else. Then suspicion started to flare up. The wallet had been buttoned into my pants' pocket. I was sure of it. However clumsy Junior had been undressing me, he couldn't have dropped it out by accident. He must have left it there deliberately.

Eight hundred pesos and a plane ticket to America would have been more of a temptation for a boy like Junior than the apple to Eve. He must have been working under very strict orders. Someone—Halliday—had told him to get my clothes but on no account to steal my wallet. Why?

Out of kindness? I laughed out loud. A surly laugh. They had left me my wallet because they had some reason for wanting me to keep my ticket and money. That was the only answer to that one. And why had they taken my clothes? Because this "thing" they imagined I had been given by or had taken from Deborah was small enough to be concealed somewhere in a suit?

I was too mad to think it through any farther than that. But there was one thing that forced itself brutally on my consciousness. They had killed Deborah and they had slugged me to get what they wanted. The fact that I didn't have it made no difference. I couldn't go to them and say: "Listen, chum, you've got the wrong guy." They thought I was their man and they were going to go on thinking that way. Whether I liked it or not, I was in this up to the neck.

IT wasn't any longer a question of: "I'm leaving in two days." The question was: "Am I going to stay alive long enough to make the plane?"

I paced up and down the room, cold, embarrassed and smoldering.

The door creaked. I turned.

Vera Garcia hurried in, her silver fox cape swinging around her shoulders. She took a step toward me and then gave

the hammiest Russian double-take I had ever seen.

"Gods," she exclaimed. "What happens with you? You take the sun bath?"

"Yes." I said. "There's nothing like a convent cell for getting a delightful nut-brown tan."

She said: "Is this true?"

"No," I said. "Our friend, Junior. He followed me here, slugged me and stole my clothes."

"The pretty boy with the cage of the bird?"

"The pretty boy with the cage of the bird."

She giggled. She thought it was funny. "I come from the shrine. I wait. All the time I am waiting for you and wondering."

"You didn't see him go by with the sack?"

"I notice no one. So many all the time, back and forth." She came and put her hands on my bare arms. She studied me appraisingly, a frankly female smile moving her lips. "It is the good body you have. A man's body. Strong." She noticed the swelling above my ear and her smile fled before Slavic indignation. "You poor darling. He hit you."

"What did you think he did? Ask me to pose for an art photo?"

"The thief!" she cried. "The murderer! We catch him."

"Right now," I said, "you'd better rustle me up something to wear. I'm tired of being an ad for Strength and Health."

"Yes, yes." She swung the cape off her shoulders and put it around me. "You take my animal."

I glanced down. From above, it didn't look good.

"A silver fox wrap and a pair of shorts," I said. "What sort of an outfit is that?"

She shook her head in solemn agreement. "No. Is not good for a man. Wait. I find something."

She hurried away. A few moments later, I heard a turbulence of scurrying feet and excited voices outside. Vera's voice rose above the others in high Spanish. The door was thrown open and Vera ran in. Behind her was a priest in a white cassock, four black-eyed little acolytes, three laborers in denims and an old, old woman with her head wrapped in a blue *rebozo*.

Her eyes flashing, Vera pointed at me as if I were an exhibit and jabbered, waving her hands up and down. Her Russian soul had no concern for modesty. It never entered her head, I was sure, that an audience made me uncomfortable. The acolytes giggled. The old, old woman crossed herself. The priest came to me, examined my head solemnly and returned to Vera. Everyone gesticulated.

I could not follow the course of the argument, but I noticed what looked like the edge of a pair of pants protruding from the bottom of one of the laborer's denims. I took a twenty peso bill from my wallet and handed it to her.

"He has pants on," I said. "Buy the denims."

Vera took the money concentrating on the one laborer, jabbering and shaking the bill at him like a fist. He simpered and hung his head.

Over her shoulder, she cried to me: "Off with the denims, I say. He say he shy."

THE priest, left out of the argument, was watching me disapprovingly over steel-rimmed spectacles. One of the acolytes tugged at his skirts. He knocked him away with his hand. The old woman had sat down on the floor and was blinking at me from under the *rebozo*.

Vera, abandoning persuasion for more direct tactics, fell upon the bashful Indian and started to undo the buttons which held up his denims at the shoulders. The denims dropped to the floor and the Indian, decent in a pair of pants, stepped sulkily out of them. Vera pushed the money into his hand and brought the denims triumphantly to me, laughing her great bell laugh.

"Atta girl," I said.

"I tell you," she said, "when I am mad,

they are all afraid."

I put on the overalls. I managed to button them at the shoulders but they were grotesquely small. They clove to my thighs and the legs stopped somewhere half way down my calves. Vera studied them and my bare feet delightedly.

"Oh, is so pretty. Like Nijinsky."

"Gee," I said. "Tanks loads."

"What is this, tanks loads?"

"Thank you," I said.

The priest had seized his opportunity to escape from such disturbingly eccentric foreigners. The acolytes had gone with him. The stripped Indian suddenly decided that everything was very funny. It must have dawned on him at last that twenty pesos was enough to buy three or four new pairs of denims in the market.

He was showing the bill to the other Indians. They were all grinning. They filed out of the room. Only the old woman was left, sitting on the floor. I think she had forgotten why she was there, and was just going on sitting because she was tired.

Vera was an excitable girl. Now she started getting maternal about my bruise.

"Quick," she said. "Quick, we go to the doctor."

"I don't need a doctor," I said. "I have a thick skull. What I need is a suit and a pair of shoes. Unless you've any more devotions on your mind, let's get back to my place."

We returned to the room where the shrine was situated and passed through the crowd of patient pilgrims into the church itself. It was still full of worshippers. They weren't interested in the spectacle of a gorgeous girl in silver fox walking with a barefoot man in skintight denims. Even in the market, no one paid us any attention. Mexicans have learned to expect or accept anything from foreigners.

But Vera Garcia was not a Mexican and she had the theater in her blood. She was eating up the drama of the situation. This was Her Adventure. On the drive home, I was swamped with suggestions and questions.

My answers were noncommittal because I was too busy figuring what to do. I couldn't forget the whole thing. That was obvious now. There was too great a chance of something even less pleasant happening later on. Apart from anything else, they must know where I lived, because Junior had started to tail me from my front door. Even if it were possible, I was much too mad to abandon the apartment and skulk in a hotel until the plane left.

AND yet it wasn't easy to decide on a plan when I knew so little of what I was up against. Vera was chattering about the police and the Embassy. But this was something much more complicated and dangerous than a casual encounter with a thug.

The police might make a half-hearted attempt to locate Junior. They might even recover my clothes from the Monte de Piedad, the national pawn shop. The Embassy, certainly, would be sympathetically incredulous and talk about the delicate balance of friendship between the two countries.

None of that would bring me closer to a solution of the mystery of Deborah Brand and Halliday, or make me safer.

No. For better or worse, I was on my own. At least from now on I'd be on my guard, ready for anything.

If Mr. Halliday started anything new, I'd give him back as good as he gave.

When we reached the apartment, Vera Garcia came up without being invited. I wasn't in the mood for dizzy glamour girls. I wanted to be alone to think some more. But she had stuck by me valiantly and I didn't have the heart to throw her out. I opened the front door and let her pass ahead into the hall.

As I paused to take my keys out of the lock, she hurried inquisitively farward.

"Gods," I heard her exclaim. "Such a mess. In your life you need the woman."

I joined her at the threshold of the living room and saw exactly what she meant. The room had been ransacked.

All the drawers in the desk were open. Papers were scattered on the floor. The cushions had been tugged off the couches and tossed around.

I hurried into the bedroom. Here the chaos was even more complete. All my suits had been taken from the closet and were piled at random on one of the beds. The bureau drawers were open, with handkerchiefs and shorts sticking out of them. Even my suitcases had been lugged down from the top of the closet and lay open on the carpet. Their linings had been systematically ripped out.

Before I got too mad, I felt a pinch of awe. There was nothing small about Halliday—if it were Halliday. While one of his stooges had dogged me through the city, another had broken into my apartment. He certainly wanted whatever he wanted badly.

I thought of Deborah's silver hair streaming below the green water of the cenote. Part of me began to wish that I had gone with Iris to Hollywood and never seen Yucatan. But another part—the part that was mad—started slowly to champion Deborah's cause. Now I was beginning to get a personal taste of what she'd been up against, and I felt a genuine pity for her.

This was too rugged for a kid of twenty. I remembered her young, clumsy lips against mine. I wasn't going to be happy until I'd done something very nasty to the person who had thrown her down that cenote.

CHAPTER X

VERA had come into the bedroom. I heard her voice, high with indignation.

"What happen? This is not the untidiness. They burgle, no? They hit you. Now they burgle you."

She came around me, put her hands on my denim-ed arms and looked up at me, half astonished, half fascinated.

"What is it with you? Why they chase you and hit you and burgle you? Perhaps you are the spy? Yes? Or the big gangster?"

I wasn't going to tell her any more than I could help. It was too early for allies.

"So far as I know," I said, "I'm just a tourist."

"You do not understand why they burgle and hit"

"No."

She turned to the phone. "We call the police."

"No."

"Why not?"

I grinned at her. "Because."

She watched me keenly. "So you lie. All this you do understand. It is big, big secret. No police."

I might have known she was too intelligent and too enthusiastically inquisitive to be stalled off. I took her arm.

"Okay. It's a big secret. My own private affair. Now, how about helping me tidy things up and find out what they've snitched?"

She was as biddable as she was bright. She asked no more questions and started meekly to help me clean up the apartment. We fixed the living room first and then the bedroom. As I expected, nothing, so far as I could see, had been taken.

Vera's meekness continued until she found a photograph of Iris which had been pulled out of its frame. She picked it up and studied it with flashing eyes. She snapped imperiously:

"Who is it—this sexy woman?"

"My wife," I said.

She swung round, looking up at me reproachfully. "You—married?"

"What did you think I was? A rich widow, too?"

"Gods." She slammed the photograph down on the dressing-table in Russian abandon to pique. "Always it is this way. Always the real men already they are grabbed up by the cheap—"

"Careful of the noun," I said.

"You think I care of the nouns?"

"But I do," I said. "You're being rude, disorderly and obstreperous."

She blinked. "What is it, this obstreperous?"

"Bad," I said.

"Pouff." She shrugged and dropped sulkily down on the couch. "Now, for this, I need a drink."

She was pouting like a little girl, mad as a hornet. I thought it was rather sweet. I made her a Cuba libre and, leaving her, went into the bedroom and stripped off the Indian's denims. While I had a hot shower and dressed, I thought about Halliday.

When I rejoined Vera in the living room she had finished her drink and had removed the Cossack hat and the silver foxes. She was lying exotically on the couch, smoking a cigarette. Her tempers seemed to be as short-lived as they were violent. She looked in a very good humor and, when she saw me, she laughed her deep, infectious laugh.

"Ah. Now he is pretty again, the married one." She stroked the edge of the couch. "Come sit with me."

I WAS still thinking about Deborah and Halliday. I sat down. She touched the bump above my ear, letting her fingers linger caressingly.

"Already she is better, yes? Smaller? She hurts much?"

"Not much."

She was close. Her knee brushed against me. She was luscious and obviously as sexual as a French maid in an old-time bedroom comedy. But I wasn't in an old-time bedroom comedy. I was wondering about Halliday, what he thought I had. It must be something small enough to carry around with me but, presumably, not small enough to go in my wallet.

A jewel? It was hard to believe in Deborah as a jewel thief smuggling a priceless gem across borders. An Inca relic then? With Deborah's father an archeologist in Peru that made more sense. But what Inca relic could be small enough? A jewel. I was back at the jewel again. Vera's hand had left the bump and was straying to my ear.

"I am good, no?" She purred. "I ask no questions. Inside I am sizzling with the curiosity but I ask no questions."

"That's the girl," I said.

She began to play with the lobe of my ear. "I promise the old man. For one year after he go, I promise not to have friends."

"You did?"

"The year she is finished last Thursday." Her face came closer to mine. She smelt like a perfume factory. Her smile was unabashed. "You who get chased and hit and burgled, you who are married to this, this—which does not bother to live with you and give you love, you like to be my friend?"

Something about the soft touch of her fingers against my skin brought back a memory of Deborah. There was no physical resemblance. Deborah had been a little inexperienced girl play-acting at being a siren. Vera was the real thing, attractive enough to inflame the plaster monk with the broken arm. But the memory produced a sudden suspicion. Deborah had made love to me a couple of hours after we met. Now Vera was doing the same thing. I wasn't that attractive to women.

I turned and looked at her, on my guard. She looked back. Her face darkened with indignation. Abruptly her hand dropped from my ear.

"What happens? Are you the man? Or the boiled egg? To you, I am ugly, yes, revolting."

"Don't be dumb. You're beautiful. Scrumptious."

"What is this scrumptious?"

"Beautiful."

She shrugged dramatically. "Of course I am beautiful. But you I do not please. What happens?"

"It looks like a lot's happening—very fast."

She ignored the implications of that remark. "You think all the time of this wife?"

"Sure I think of her."

"You crazy? You think of the woman who is not there when another woman is here?" A gleam of understanding showed in her eyes. "Ah, I know. It is

the make-up. All the day through the corpses and the shrines I go and do not change the face. Yes, that is it. The make-up, all over my face goes dribbling. Is repulsive. I fix."

She jumped up and started for the bedroom. At the door she turned and threw me a smile of great amiability and forgiveness.

"I come back with the new face. Then is different. Then you forget your wife, that—"

"Don't say it," I said.

AS I was waiting dubiously for her return, the door buzzer rang. I had taken such a beating since my return to Mexico City that my first reaction was one of caution. The buzzer sounded again. I moved to the window and, standing behind the curtain, looked down to the street. Outside the front door, compact, small and determined in her shrill green suit, was Mrs. Snood.

I couldn't have been more pleased to see anyone. Mrs. Snood with her daughters and her economies was a monument to normalcy in a world gone crazy. She would stall the question of being Vera's "friend" until I had more time to think. She might also be able to tell me where I could find Halliday.

At least I ought to know where he lived.

I went to the kitchen and pressed the button that released the front door. Soon a tap sounded and I opened to her. Her bright little face lit up with pleasure when she saw me. A new orchid, yellow this time, was pinned disastrously to her lapel. Her hair was as irrespressible as ever.

"So you're here at last. I called twice and stopped by in the morning. No reply."

"Sorry. I was out."

Her beady gaze fell on the swelling above my ear.

"Goodness. Someone hit you?"

"I ran into a door."

She grinned sympathetically. "*Tequila* does that to me too."

She stumped past me into the living room and gave it an assessing look.

"Not bad. How much do they sting you a month?"

I told her. She caught sight of Vera's silver foxes and the black Cossack cap.

"Oh, you have a friend. I'm sorry. I—"

"Think nothing of it," I said. "I'm delighted. Sit down. I'll give you a drink."

"Well, just one. I have a taxi outside. I'm on my way back from those pyramids. Can't remember the name. I thought it'd be smarter going by taxi instead of taking the tour. I think I got gypped as usual."

"How were the pyramids?" I asked.

She grinned. "Oh, pyramids."

I poured her a Cuba libre. She took it and gulped at it thirstily.

"I stopped by," she said, "to ask you to come to dinner tonight. My guest, of course. I'm going to pay." She was watching me anxiously, frightened that her plan for a treat might go awry. "At Ciro's. It's the best place in town. Swanky orchestra and everything."

I liked her but, under the circumstances, I wasn't sure that I liked her enough to endure an evening at Ciro's. But before I said anything she leaned toward me and put her little pawlike hand on my knee.

"Please. Be a sport. I ran across Bill Halliday having breakfast at Sanborn's with a girl this morning. I invited him. He especially wanted you, too."

So Halliday especially wanted to see me. That was very kind of him. Suddenly the whole picture was changed.

I smiled. "Sure, sure. I'd love to come, Lena."

"Oh, wonderful. Around eight. My room at the Reforma."

Mrs. Snood finished her drink and got up. "Well, the taxi waiting down there makes me nervous. I know they don't have meters in this country, but I keep on thinking of a meter ticking and—"

She stopped as Vera Garcia came out of the bedroom. Vera had put a lot of work on her face—too much. She looked like a White Russian imitating Lynn

Fontanne imitating a White Russian.

I got up. I said: "Mrs. Snood, this is Senora Garcia."

WHEN she saw Mrs. Snood, Vera's face broke into a dazzling smile. She hurried toward her.

"How nice," she cooed. "How very nice to see you again."

I stared in surprise. "You know each other?"

"Of course," said Vera.

"Of course," said Mrs. Snood, too. "What a funny coincidence. Mrs. Garcia's the girl who was with Bill Halliday this morning."

I managed to keep my face in control. Vera dropped lazily into a chair, crossing her legs and lighting a cigarette.

"Halliday?" she echoed. "Who then is this Halliday?"

"The man who was having breakfast with you at Sanborn's," said Mrs. Snood. "Isn't he a friend of yours?"

"Oh, him," Vera laughed. "It seems he want to be the friend." She winked at me. "I am sitting at Sanborn's taking the morning coffee as always. Everywhere is crowded. Up he comes, this man, to my table and ask to join me. I say why not. And he talk, talk, talk. About Iowa? Yes? Or Idaho? Some of those big empty states in America. All the time he talk." She winked again. "And all the time the foot under the table—she talk too."

"Oh, dear," said Mrs. Snood. "I didn't know he was that way with young girls." She sighed. "His foot, she never talks under the table with me. But then I'm only an old hag." An idea came. She smiled at Vera eagerly. "Listen, I'm inviting Peter to dinner tonight with Mr. Halliday. Why don't you come too, Mrs. Garcia? A foursome? So much more fun. Unless you're scared of our Cleveland Wolf?"

Vera shrugged a Lynn Fontanne shrug. Me? What are their feet for?" She looked at me cozily. "If Peter come tonight I come. I am much delighted."

Mrs. Snood went chattering on about plans, but I wasn't listening.

"What a funny coincidence!" Mrs. Snood had said. That was one way of putting it. If you wanted to, you could say it was a coincidence but Vera had had coffee with Bill Halliday in Sanborn's and then dropped into my *pasteleria* for a second breakfast with her station wagon coupe parked almost outside my door. If you liked you could call it a coincidence that I should have run into her again at the Pantheon Dolores. If you liked you could also call it a coincidence that it had been Vera Garcia who had driven me to Los Remedios where Junior had found his ideal opportunity to slug me.

I glanced across the room at Vera's glossy black hair and her generous, white-rose beauty. Before Mrs. Snood's remark, she had seemed one of the most spontaneous, uncomplicated people I had ever met.

I didn't know any more.

It was almost as if I could see, standing behind her, a tall gangling American with a foolish smile, and a pretty little

[*Turn page*]

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Mexican boy with a bundle of clothes in a burlap sack.

CHAPTER XI

PUNCTUALLY at the appointed time I arrived at the tourist-de-luxe Reforma Hotel. Mrs. Snood let me into a plush suite, the price of which must have given her sleepless nights. She was wearing the bougainvillea dress ($79.95) and her hair was in its usual evening birds-nest upsweep. She looked happy and festive.

"Oh, Peter! You're the first. How nice." A dumb waiter with a bottle of rum and elegant fixings stood by a sofa. "Thought we'd have cocktails here. More fun. More economical, too. At least, that's what I figured until they slapped the service charge on me."

She refused a Daiquiri out of the shaker and handed it to me. "I'm so glad Vera Garcia's coming. Such an attractive girl. Charming."

"Charming," I said.

"I didn't know she was a friend of yours." She looked archly inquisitive. "Known her for long?"

"We met this morning," I said. "In the cemetery."

"The cemetery? My dear, how romantic." She dropped down on the edge of the bed with a sigh and sipped her cocktail. "You know, I thought she and Mr. Halliday were friends, too. But it seems he was just being a naughty old man."

"So it seems."

"I hope they don't fight. I do like people at my parties to like each other. It's such fun when people do."

Under the circumstances, I found her zest for life rather depressing. I could imagine her giving a cocktail party on Bikini, pointing up to the sky and saying: "Oh, look at that charming little atomic bomb. I do hope it'll be fun when it lands."

Vera had left my apartment with Mrs. Snood. I was still no nearer deciding whether she was another of Halliday's stooges or whether I was developing a suspicion neurosis. There wasn't enough data. The evidence was maddening, working equally both ways. I was hoping something would happen at the party to put me wise.

In a few minutes, she came, filling the room with animation and perfume and gusty laughter. She was dressed for glamour but, as in the morning, her glamour needed pruning. The black evening gown, sleek as seaweed, was magnificent, but she had barnacled it up with pearls, a huge amethyst stick pin and about a dozen silver bracelets. There was even a scarlet poinsettia in her hair.

If there hadn't been so much natural beauty, she would have looked farcical. As it was, there was still a touch of comedy. She was gorgeous, but something a Marx brother would have chased.

She was being on her best behavior. She loved the part. She was thrilled to see us again. She adored Daiquiris.

As she prattled, her charm was so guileless that the idea of her playing a double game seemed preposterous. My suspicions of her began to dissolve. After all, there was little to be suspicious of—only a public meeting with Halliday for which she had a convincing explanation. I started to warm to her again. Then I remembered Halliday's guilelessness, and I was back on the fence.

I waited for his arrival with growing impatience. It was the vagueness of the situation which galled me. Until I had some glimmering of what he wanted from me or could at least prove that he was back of it all I couldn't get my teeth into any plan for action. I grew increasingly keyed-up, Finally, after about twenty minutes, he arrived.

ALTHOUGH I was prepared for it, the extreme insignificance of his appearance almost disarmed me. He shambled into the room in a gray unpressed suit and a battered old pair of brogues. His light hair tumbled untid-

ily over his forehead and his smile below the unrevealing glasses was the essence of foolish friendliness.

He embraced Mrs. Snood in burlesque Mexican fashion and pumped my hand calling: "Hi, there, Peter, old boy." When he saw Vera, his face grinned with delighted surprise. "Why, if it isn't the little senorita from Sanborn's."

He acted as if he had already had a few drinks and was all set to go. Mrs. Snood, fiddling with his coat, said: "She's a friend of Peter's." She tapped Halliday's arm. "And she told us what you were up to this morning."

He seemed delighted as if Mrs. Snood had complimented his manhood. "She told on me, eh? Well, what do you know?" He winked at me. "You must have something I haven't got, brother. Couldn't get to first base with her this morning."

He grinned again at Vera to show that he was kidding, dropped down on the couch next to her, raised his Daiquiri and said: "Here's looking at you."

His entrance had been dyed-in-the-wool Sinclair Lewis and from then on he out-babbited Babbit, telling interminable anecdotes about people called Jim and Bill and Joe in Cleveland and then, as the cocktails stacked up inside him, he eased over into smutty stories.

After a couple of Daiquiris, he said: "Little Billy has to go to the place we don't talk about," and disappeared through the bedroom into the bathroom. When he came out, the anecdotes were even rougher.

I had been ready for anything except this particular kind of locker-room-set boredom. As a producer, I know my actors. I couldn't catch a false note in the performance—if it was a performance. He was any good-time Charlie and he had made the party a dead ringer for a dozen others which must have been going on in the hotel at the moment.

And it stayed that way, even after the cocktails were finished and we migrated downstairs to the very American restaurant where a very American orchestra was playing very American dance music above a very American clamor.

Lena Snood, who kept saying: "Isn't Bill the funniest man? He kills me," extravagantly ordered champagne. It fizzed along with the courses and with Halliday's "have-you-heard-this-ones" until I began to feel stupefied.

Every now and then I danced with Vera or Mrs. Snood, but Vera seemed to have exhausted her vitality laughing at Halliday's jokes. Mrs. Snood jabbered interminably about things to which I could no longer listen.

I had given up looking for hidden relationships or secret significances. There was obviously nothing to look for. Maybe I was on the hopelessly wrong track.

At one stage I was dancing with Mrs. Snood. Dimly I noticed that, in imitation of Vera's poinsettia, she had pinned an unsuitable pink gladiolus in her hair. I caught the familiar words.

"—such a funny man, Bill Halliday."

"Yes," I said automatically.

"Did he tell you the one about the cat with the blind eye?"

"No," I said automatically.

She started presumably to tell me about the cat with the blind eye. Suddenly she broke off, called out and waved toward the bar.

I LOOKED around. A large man with red hair was sitting alone on a stool, crouched disconsolately over a drink. Mrs. Snood called out again and grinned up at me.

"Peter, it's Mr. Johnson, the bridegroom from Yucatan."

As I guided her nearer through the dancers, I saw she was right. We reached him and Mrs. Snood grabbed his arm.

"Hi, there. What's the idea? Doing the town without your bride? You should be ashamed."

Mr. Johnson looked up at us and the sudden disarmingly boyish smile came. Then it faded and the worried look in his blue eyes took over his whole face.

"Lupe's in the hospital," he said. "The oddest thing. The pains hit her just after we got to the hotel. I rushed her out and they operated right away. They

told me it was appendicitis."

Mrs. Snood's face dropped with good-natured concern.

"The poor child. How is she?"

"She'll be okay. But she's frightened, poor kid, and in pain. I've been sitting with her all day but they turned me out at ten." His big heavy hand circled his glass. He looked wistful and lost like a St. Bernard that couldn't find the right person to save. "Hell of a thing on a honeymoon."

"Dreadful," Mrs. Snood sighed. "Expensive, too, I bet. How much is the doctor going to stick you?"

"Plenty, I guess." A shadow of the sweet smile came back to his face. "I'm getting quietly tight to celebrate."

"What you need's champagne." Mrs. Snood looped her arm through his. "We've got it at our table."

He looked from her to me doubtfully. "You don't want to bother with—"

But Mrs. Snood was leading him firmly through the dancers.

Anything connected with anyone who had been in Yucatan could be significant. But as Mrs. Snood guided Mr. Johnson over and absorbed him into the group, I couldn't trace anything suspect in this apparently chance meeting.

Mrs. Snood's announcement of the bride's operation bogged the gaiety down for a while. But soon she became tired of the new mood she herself had introduced and, trying to whoop things up, said:

"At least she's out of danger, Mr. Johnson. You should be grateful it wasn't worse. At least she didn't fall into a cenote like Miss Brand."

"Miss Brand?" The query came surprisingly from Vera. "Who is this Miss Brand who fall in a cenote?"

"Why, didn't Peter tell you?" Mrs. Snood's birdy gaze pecked at me and then turned back to Vera. "And she was such a friend of his. It was terrible. We all felt terrible."

She was just high enough to welcome the chance of feeling terrible again. While she told the story, I watched Halliday. If he had any guilty knowledge, this was a moment when he might give himself away. But the only expression he showed was one of alcoholic boredom. Once he let his hand drop, as if by accident, against Vera's smooth bare shoulder. She edged away. That was all that happened.

Mrs. Snood concluded: "My, it was terrible. And, just before she died, the poor kid gave Peter a detective story. He lent it to me. All the time I read about murders and things I thought of that poor girl down there in the cenote. Gruesome? That's what it was."

She had managed to depress herself again, but almost immediately her natural spirits revived and with a "Come on, Mr. Johnson, let's snap out of this and dance," she dragged the bridegroom onto the floor.

THE fun and games went on grimly until two o'clock. Then, after a minute itemized examination of the check, Mrs. Snood paid it, left a huge tip for the waiter and liberated us.

We all moved out to the hotel lobby. The bridegroom was the first to escape. Then Halliday started to leave. He kissed Mrs. Snood, bowed with ponderous formality to Vera and pumped my hand again.

"Well, Peter, old boy, old boy, don't do nothing I wouldn't do."

He was weaving from the champagne. I felt a bleak sensation of everything slipping through my fingers. Was I making a colossal mistake? Was the connection between Deborah's death and what happened to me in Mexico City just something in my mind, after all?

Or, if it was real, did the true menace lie in some completely different direction? I tried to associate murder, mayhem and conspiracy with this genial hick tourist in front of me. I thought how ludicrous it would seem if I accused him of it right there.

His hand dropped limply out of mine. He glanced over his shoulder to leer with middle-aged appreciation at Vera's naked back. Leaning toward me, he whispered:

"That'sh some girl, Peter, me boy. Attractive girl. Don't do anything I would do."

That was a terrific joke. He broke into a gale of laughter and punched my arm boyishly. He turned away then and lumbered down the steps which led to the street.

"Good night," he called. "Goo' ni', all. Goo' ni', goo' people. Goo' ni'."

He reached the door. Cautiously he pulled it open and departed into the night.

Soon afterward, Vera and I said "thank-you" speeches to Mrs. Snood and left. Vera lived, she said, only a couple of blocks away. She hadn't brought the station wagon coupe. She asked me to walk her home. As we strolled through the stately, moon-washed streets, she clung warmly to my arm.

"Such people," she said. "Such bore. Such jabber, jabber. Gods."

After a couple of blocks, we reached a large Frenchified mansion on a corner with an iron carriage gate in its center. She paused, saying:

"Is here where I live. Huge, no? Hideous. It is for Mrs. Snood. To say: 'Look how much it costs.' You come in for a drink?"

I still felt confused and frustrated. Earlier in the evening, when I was suspicious of her, I might have suspected a trap with Halliday or Junior perhaps waiting for me behind that dark iron gateway. Now all I expected, if I accepted the invitation, was another rather torrid man-woman scene. I didn't feel in the mood.

"Thanks," I said, "but I guess I'd better be calling it a day."

She pulled her hand pettishly out of my arm.

"So it is still that way. Still you think of me as the great fat bore."

"Now, Vera—"

But her Russian temper had once again got out of control. Brandishing her arm theatrically, she cried: "Go, then. Get hit again and get naked again of all your clothes and see whether I say a word. Oh, you make me mad! It is my morale. You hurt me in the morale. Quick. Go quick."

SHE tugged an old-fashioned bell pull on one of the pillars of the gateway. With her back turned to me, she stood in ominous silence, tapping her foot until the doors clanked open, revealing an ancient *velador* wrapped in a serape. She spoke to him in rapid Spanish and he withdrew.

For a moment she stood with her back still to me, ignoring me. Then suddenly she turned. In the moonlight, I could see her big friendly smile. The temper had gone again.

"I am still mad," she said. "Very mad. But I pretend I am not. I have great control. I know. I hate you, but you take care, no? You don't let them come after you again with parrot cages. Promise?"

"I promise."

She glanced down the street. It was deserted except for a light blue sedan which was parked half a block away under a street lamp.

"Is a taxi, I think. The streets are dark and empty. You take the taxi, for safeness."

I looked down the tree-lined sidewalk to the car. Taxis are just like ordinary automobiles in Mexico, except that they have a little pasteboard sign under the windshield wiper saying: "Libre." I saw the sign. It was a taxi all right.

"Sure," I said. "I'll take the taxi."

She leaned toward me and kissed me impulsively on the mouth. "Perhaps tomorrow I am not mad. I do not know. We will see. But, oh, tonight—I burn. Good night, hateful."

"Good night, Vera."

She slipped through the iron gates into the shadowy patio beyond. In a moment I saw the old *velador* shuffle forward. He closed the gates and clanked a chain shut inside.

Alone on the bleak night street, I felt dissatisfied and solitary. I wished I had accepted her invitation. Although danger now seemed far away, I missed her warmth. I stood for a moment in the shadow and then started toward the

light blue sedan. The driver saw me coming and turned on the lights. I reached him and, without bending to the window, asked the fare to Londres.

He said: "Two pesos."

That was all right. I opened the rear door and started to climb in.

As I did the driving mirror came into my range of vision. Reflected in it, two dark passive eyes were watching me. My glance dropped to the driver himself. In the dim radiance of the street light, I saw a prettily curved cheek and long, girlish lashes.

For a moment I thought: "I'm going loco. I'm seeing things." Then I stepped back out of the car. Instantly the driver swung round from the wheel to face me.

I wasn't seeing things, of course. The taxi wasn't a taxi. It was an ordinary car disguised by the simple device of a pasteboard sign on the windshield.

Sitting at the wheel, pointing a revolver at my stomach, was Junior.

I felt a panicky sense of unreality. "What's the idea?" I cracked, stalling. "Need another suit?"

He jerked open the front door next to the curb.

"*Subase,*" he said.

It meant "Get in." I knew that. Junior had a way of not taking no for an answer. I knew that, too. I abandoned the idea of trying to duck back to the cover of Vera's porch. It was too risky. It was pretty hopeless trying to attract the attention of her night watchman too. The gun gleamed. "*Subase,*" he said again.

I DIDN'T like the quietness of his voice. I didn't like danger coming pointlessly this way in the form of a pretty little boy with unknown rancor and a gun. I still hesitated, trying to find a solution although I knew there wasn't one.

"*Subase,*" he said for the third time and his dreamy eyes, fixed on me with their secret, impersonal hostility, were steady as the gun.

"Okay," I said. "Anything to oblige."

I took a step toward the open car door. The eyes blinked. I could tell he was thinking: "Is he going to try to jump me?" I wouldn't have had a chance, of course, with the open door, the gear lever and the steering wheel between us. I took another step, then a hand dropped on my shoulder from behind and pulled me back. A familiar, blurred American voice said:

"Hey, Peter, ol' boy, what's the idea taking a taxi? Getting lazy? After that champagne, you need exercise. That's wha' you need. L'il exercise."

I let myself be twisted around. Standing behind me, beaming heartily, was Bill Halliday.

He waved at the taxi to go away. Sliding his hand to my arm, he started walking me off down the sidewalk.

"Taxis," he said reproachfully. "Guy your age taking taxis. Old woman, that's what you are."

I didn't know where he had come from or how he had come. I didn't care. Ahead a pale street lamp marked the end of the block. As we moved toward it, I waited, excruciatingly, for Junior to shoot.

But nothing happened. We reached the corner and turned it. The taxi had not even moved.

Halliday was walking in a sort of zigzag. He lurched heavily against me.

"A ni' cap," he muttered. "Live around here. Just around the block. You come up for a ni' cap, old boy. Nothing like ni' cap. Wa' Gertrude Stein say? A ni'cap's a ni' caps a ni'cap."

And a man who saved you from a gun boy was a man who saved you from a gun boy was a man who saved you from a gunboy.

CHAPTER XII

BY now we were halfway down the side street block. Ahead loomed the safe spaciousness of the Avenida Insurgentes. The car wasn't going to follow. I was sure of that then. Some of the tension in me eased.

But my mind was tangled with ques-

tions that had no answers. Why had Junior let Halliday walk me right out from under his gun? Because he operated on orders and there was no order to cover the sudden appearance of another American? Or because Halliday was his boss? If Halliday had sent Junior to get me, though, why had Halliday bothered to rescue me? And had he rescued me deliberately? Or had this been just another of those fifty-seven varieties of coincidence?

As Halliday, rambling at my side, kept up his tipsily cheerful monologue, I found it almost impossible to imagine him capable of anything more subtle or sinister than putting on a paper hat and blowing a tin whistle.

I thought of Vera a few minutes ago, sulking, impulsively kissing me, pointing down the street. "Be sure you take the taxi." A shiver of doubt slid through me. Vera pointing out the taxi, where Junior was waiting with the gun. Vera driving me to Los Remedios where Junior was waiting with the gun.

Could it be Vera and not Halliday?

Vera working with someone else through Junior?

We reached the drafty corner of Insurgentes. The neon lights of a few night clubs and elegant cantinas still twinkled in the darkness. A couple of cars were racing out to the suburbs.

I wondered where I would be headed now if I had stepped into the light blue sedan. Not to Vera. Not to Halliday. That was certain. To an obscure death in a ditch out in the rough, desolate countryside beyond Xochimilco? Or to meet my real antagonist?

But who was my real antagonist? Mr. Johnson, morose over his bride's appendectomy? Mrs. Snood tucked up in her hotel bed with a detective story?

There were so few solutions to chose from and none of them were worth a thing. I had expected the evening to rescue me from confusion.

It had confusion worse confounded.

We had crossed Insurgentes and moved into a dark, tree-shaded side street. "Dinamarca," I thought. Halliday, who seemed even more drunk than he had been at the Reforma, came to a clumsy stop outside a modernistic apartment house door.

"Li'l apartment," he said. "Not much to look at, nothin' to see. B'longs fr'nd of mine. Len' it me. Ni'cap, me boy, old boy."

Change clattered in his pocket as he fumbled around for his keys. He brought them out and guided one unsteadily into the lock.

"Clear the head, a ni'cap."

He pushed the heavy glass and iron door inward and waited with alcoholic chivalry for me to pass ahead of him into the house. It could be a trap. I realized that.

But if it was a trap, I was being lured into it by an elaborateness almost beyond the realms of possibility. The streets had proved themselves dangerous enough for me. There was nothing to prevent Junior from driving around the corner the moment I was alone again. Of two chances, going in with Halliday was by far the less risky.

BESIDES, my main purpose earlier that evening had been to get alone with Halliday. Even if my suspicions had shifted elsewhere, this was as good a chance as any to tackle him.

I walked into a hallway which looked like an exhibit for "Home Decorating of the Future." Halliday came after me. He swung the door to with a heavy clang.

On the second floor he stopped before an apartment marked 3, danced his key dance again and opened the door. He went ahead and fumbled on a light switch. A small unexpectedly elegant living room came into view with zebra-striped drapes and deep yellow chairs. A large bouquet of pink carnations stood in a vase on a coffee table. The room was rich with their perfume.

It was also encouragingly empty.

"Si' down, old boy."

Halliday flopped a hand onto my shoulder and guided me to one of the yellow chairs. He peeled off his topcoat,

letting it drop to the floor, and moved toward an inner door.

"Kitschun. See wha' I can rustle up."

He disappeared and started to clatter behind the door. The moment was good from my point of view. If Halliday was innocent, then his drunkenness wasn't a sham. By tomorrow, whatever I said to him would have become blurred in the fumes of alcohol.

If he wasn't innocent, if he had murdered Deborah Brand and had designs on me, he was just playing drunk. But that didn't matter either. If he was guilty, there was nothing I could tell him that he didn't know already. Provided he had no gun, I was okay.

I got up quietly and searched as much of the room as I could before I heard him coming out of the kitchen. I had ducked back into my chair when he emerged, carrying two Cuba libres with exaggerated care.

"Rum, old boy," he intoned. "Yo ho ho and a bo'l of tum."

He handed me a glass, weaved past the pink carnations and dropped onto the yellow couch.

He raised his drink with a flourish. "Here's skol in your eye."

I raised my drink to him. "Thanks," I said, deciding on the approach direct. "And thanks for saving me just now."

"Don' menshun it. Only too glad save a pal. Always was. Tha's me. Bill Halliday." He screwed up his eyes and watched me, his head cocked suspciously on one side. "Thank me for saving you? From wha'?"

"That taxi. You knew it wasn't a taxi, didn't you? You knew the driver was holding me up with a gun."

"Holdin' you up with a . . . You kiddin'?"

"I'm not kidding."

He leaned forward on the couch, blinking. "Holdin' you up with a gun? Why?"

"For the same reason he followed me all morning and finally caught up with me and slugged me at the Shrine out at Los Remedios. The same reason that someone burgled my apartment."

He seemed to be making a supreme effort to understand. Then he gave up—his eyes dulled.

"Burgling, slugging," he murmured, "Don't get it. Wha' you talking about?"

"I thought you might be able to tell me."

"Me?" The word came out belligerently. "Why me? Wha'sh this about? Who's apar'ment burgled? Mine wasn't burgled. 'Syours?"

I said: "Know a little boy, pretty little Mexican boy. About nineteen?"

"Wha's his name?" asked Halliday vaguely.

"You ought to know if he's on your pay roll."

HE tried to get there but couldn't.

"Pay roll," he repeated.

I blazed a new trail. "You took my bag instead of yours at the airport, didn't you?"

He remembered that. "Sure. Sure. Your bag. Both gadarbine, garadine, gar. . . . Both same. Porter. Mishtake. Shtupid."

"And you inquired after me at the desk in the Hotel Yucatan before you knew me."

"Did I?" He looked puzzled and then a smile came, a broad, sharing-the-joke smile. "Hey, there, Peter, old boy, old kidder."

I took a real jump. "And you followed Deborah Brand to Chichen-Itzá."

The smile faded. He looked almost alert. "Follow who?"

"Deborah Brand."

"Follow Deborah Bran'—who?"

"You."

"You crazy." He spoke with great, painstaking emphasis. Then he tittered. "Deborah Bran's dead. Can't follow dead girl. Why'd I follow a dead girl?"

"To get what she had," I said. "And to murder her."

"Murder her!" For the first since we'd started to talk, he showed signs of sobering up. His mouth dropped foolishly open. "Washn't murdered. Fell in a well." The euphony of the phrase seemed to please him. He repeated it: "Fell in a well."

"She could have been pushed in a well."

"Pushed? Why?"

Why?

"I don't know."

He had moved back to the couch and sat down. "So she was pushed in the well." He whistled through his teeth. "What do you know?" A sudden, clever look spread over his face. "Oh, you, always kiddin'."

"I'm not kidding."

"Oh, yes you are," he sing-songed, like a little boy saying "Nyah." "Oh, yes you are. Because—you know why? If you thought she'd been murdered, know wh'a you'd have done? You'd 've gone to the pleesh in Merida."

He looked at me triumphantly, implying that I couldn't get around that telling thrust.

"I didn't go to the police then," I said, "because I didn't have any evidence."

He nodded to show he understood that okay. "And now you've got evidence?"

"Just that they're gunning for me."

"Why they gunnin' for you? Why?"

"I guess because they think I was tied up with her, because they think I've got something they're looking for. Incidentally, I haven't."

His lips pursed into a grimace of concentration. For quite a few moments he didn't speak. I expected him to come out with something fairly sober. But I had got it wrong. He had been sliding even further into his drunk. He closed his eyes.

IT seemed futile to continue this farcical interview. By now I was as convinced of his innocence as I was of his drunkeneness. There could surely be no point to a scene of this sort if it was a fake. His eyes were still shut. His head was nodding.

I got up and said: "Well, thanks for the drink. I'll be pushing along."

His eyes jerked open. He peered at me blearily and then, pushing himself up, lumbered to the window. He swung back one of the zebra-striped drapes.

"Shtuffy in here. Tha's wha' it is. Shtuffy—shtuffy—"

He began to fumble with the catch of the window. I crossed to him, holding out my hand.

"Well, thanks, thanks again Halliday. Time I went home."

He tugged the window inward with a little grunt. "Wha's tha'?" He turned to look at me owlishly. "Goin'? Wha's sense o' tha'? Plenny of beds here. Plenny of beds. Too shnotty to shtay here? You. . . ."

The sentence trailed off. He was supporting himself by a hand on the drape. He seemed to be clinging to consciousness only by a hair.

"I have to—" I started. Then I stopped.

From where I stood by his side, I could see down the dimly lit street below.

Half a block away, parked in the shadow of a tree, was a familiar light blue sedan. As I looked at it, a lighted cigarette was tossed out of the front window and dropped sparking onto the sidewalk.

I couldn't see him, but I could imagine him there at the wheel with his smooth, little-boy face unlined by sleep, his wide, patient eyes fixed on the door of Halliday's apartment house—waiting.

Junior was back.

A tingle of uneasiness came. I turned to Halliday. I began: "Well, on second thoughts, since you are so kind as to invite me—"

He grunted. Behind the shell-rimmed glasses, his little eyes watched me vacantly. Slowly his hand uncurled from the drape. He leaned toward me as if to embrace me. Then his knees buckled under him and he fell slantwise to the carpet.

The party was over for Halliday. One hangover, coming up.

I prospected through a door and found a bedroom with twin beds. I dragged him into it and hoisted him onto one of the beds. I took off his shoes, tossed an extra blanket over him and left him.

Just because I didn't believe in passing up opportunities, I made a quick search of the apartment. I found noth-

ing of any interest.

I went back into the bedroom and glanced through the window. The blue sedan was still waiting below. With a certain satisfaction I reflected that Junior had put in quite a hard day. He was going to be an awfully tired boy tomorrow.

I was tired too. There was no reason to stay up any longer. I stripped down to my undershorts and climbed into the other bed. Halliday was breathing heavily, but he at least didn't snore.

I snapped off the light. In a few moments I was asleep myself. . .

I WOKE next morning to gay, splashing sunshine. My watch said eight-thirty. Remembering, I glanced across at the other bed. Halliday still lay as I had left him, the blanket tumbled over him. I got up and walked to the window.

Pleasant, daytime things were going on in the street. A prim nursemaid was pushing a baby in a perambulator. A man was dragging a chunk of ice along in a kind of primitive kiddie-car. Two dogs were sniffing each other's noses and wagging their tails.

The light blue sedan was not there.

I felt clear-headed and surprisingly light-hearted. I went into the bathroom and took a hot shower. I found a razor and accessories in Halliday's medicine cabinet. As I shaved, a feeling almost of affection for him spread through me. Okay, he was an old bore, with a line of bad jokes and who couldn't hold his liquor, but at least he had saved me from a nasty situation, and had given me a comfortable bed for the night.

And he knew no more about Deborah Brand than I did.

My soapy fingers lost their grip on the razor and I felt the blade jag into my cheek. Blood trickled down toward my chin. I swore, looked for cotton, couldn't find any and dabbed at the blood with a towel. I located a styptic pencil and fixed the wound. But the towel had a blood stain on it.

The dirty linen basket was at my right and I opened it and tossed the towel inside. As I did, something red and shiny, poking up through the soiled towels and shirts, caught my eye. I glanced again and then a third time.

Curiously, I reached into the basket and pulled the thing out.

It was a girl's pocketbook—a large, red pocketbook.

I held it in my hand, looking at it, memories of Yucatan crowding back. I yanked open the flap. There were things inside, a white handkerchief, a lipstick, a compact, a mirror, change. But all my attention was fixed on the handkerchief.

Embroidered neatly on its corner were the initials:

D B

CHAPTER XIII

DAZEDLY I stared at the red pocketbook. Around me the walls of the cozy little white-tiled bathroom seemed to shrink, hemming me in. The pocketbook had not fallen into the cenote with Deborah. It was here, of all places, in Bill Halliday's apartment.

I knew it had not been in the clearing when the Inn manager and I had raced there after we heard the scream. Halliday must have taken it in the few minutes between the scream and the time of our arrival at the well.

If that fact did not prove he was Deborah's murderer, it came very close to doing so. Close enough.

With this new knowledge, I tried to make some sense of Halliday's behavior the night before. Obviously, he had made a one hundred per cent pure sucker out of me. He had been shamming drunk. He had deliberately rescued me from Junior and brought me to his apartment deliberately too.

But why?

To protect me from whoever it was who had hired Junior? Did that explain his pseudo-drunken pulling of the window drapes? Had that been a subtle way of letting me know that the light blue

sedan had returned and that I was safer spending the night here?

But why should he want to protect me? Were there, perhaps, two factions? Two groups of people who had been after whatever Deborah had been carrying? One group represented by Junior? Another by Halliday? Each group battling to keep me from the other?

Whatever the thing was, it must be enormously important. But if Halliday wanted something enormously important he thought I had, why hadn't he tried to get it from me last night? Why had he spent all his energy on the drunk act?

These sterile speculations darted through my brain quick as a school of minnows.

The situation was far less intelligible than Finnegan's Wake. The only thing that was certain was my own inescapable involvement in it.

I thought of Halliday lying in the next room apparently stupid with rum. Should I confront him with the pocketbook, call his bluff once and for all? It was a temptation, because I had reached a point where to know at least something of what lay behind my predicament seemed worth any risk. But I controlled myself.

Anyone as smart as Halliday wasn't going to be surprised or tricked into telling me anything he didn't want me to know. At the moment he thought he had fooled me. It was more sensible to keep him thinking that way.

I searched the contents of the pocketbook, even opening the lipstick and the compact. There was nothing revealing, just the ordinary things that every girl carries.

But one thing that might have been there was missing. Deborah had told me she had missed her plane connection to Mexico City. There ought to be a plane ticket to Mexico in the bag. There wasn't.

Had she kept it somewhere else? Or had she been lying? Or had Halliday taken it out?

I put the pocketbook back in the basket under the soiled towels and returned to the bedroom.

Halliday was still asleep or pretending to be. While I dressed, he did not stir.

I scribbled a little note saying:

Thank you for not snoring.

Maybe he'd get the crack. Maybe he wouldn't. I didn't care.

I propped it against the carnations in the living room and slipped out of the apartment.

THE Plaza Washington was a couple of blocks down the street. I walked through the morning sunshine toward the bright little square and turned into a Kiko soda fountain and ordered orange juice and coffee. It was good to be in American-style surroundings. It reminded me that I would be in the States tomorrow—maybe.

A few customers were strewn around at the little red-painted tables. There was an atmosphere of leisure and quiet. But the disturbing image of Deborah's pocketbook prevented me from developing much peace of mind.

I tried to figure why Halliday had kept it, since there was nothing in it to matter, and its presence in his apartment had been a dead give-away. He had, of course, tried to hide it where I would be least likely to find it. But I had found it and in one second it had destroyed the elaborate pretense of dumb tourist ignorance on which he had been working so hard.

Since Halliday, whatever he was, was no fool, there must be some good reason why he had not tossed the bag away into the Yucatan jungle.

But what reason?

A perky waitress with a high starched cap brought me my orange juice and flicked ineffectually at the table top with a napkin.

So far as I could see, there was only one answer. Halliday must have kept the bag because, in spite of appearances, he couldn't be sure that the thing he wanted wasn't in it. Thanks to Junior's theft of my clothes, I knew the thing

they wanted was small. But surely it couldn't be invisible.

Or could it? Why couldn't it be something written? Some message, for example, which might be written in invisible ink? Which might conceivably be scrawled somewhere in the pocketbook? Was Halliday keeping the bag until he had a chance to submit it to laboratory analysis?

The waitress brought my coffee, slapping it down in front of me and patting her black hair. As I glanced up to acknowledge it, I noticed the man at the next table. He was plump and well-shaved, fashionably wearing sun-glasses. Propped against the sugar shaker in front of him was one of those orange-bound pocket Mexican mystery stories. It's chic in Mexico to read mysteries.

It needed that visual picture to link my mind up with the detective story Deborah had given me. I had thought of it several times the day before, but because I had been figuring in terms of a jewel or some palpable object which could not be concealed in a book, I had never taken it seriously. I'd been sure Deborah hadn't given me anything of any conceivable importance. Murders don't get committed for the ownership of a book, I had said.

I could have been wrong.

You could send a code message in a book. "The Wrong Murder" by Craig Rice might be the thing they had been after all the time.

Someone had put a nickel in the inevitable juke box and "La Barca de Oro" in *danzon* rhythm brayed above the genteel clatter of coffee cups at the fountain. For the first time I began to figure out a pattern for Deborah's apparently senseless behavior on the morning of her death.

Suppose she had made a date to meet someone before breakfast at the cenote. She could, perhaps, have made it with the man I had seen lurking under her window the night before. The cenote, being remote from the rest of the ruins, was a reasonable enough spot to choose for a private rendezvous.

SUPPOSE, also, that this man was someone whom she didn't completely trust. She could have brought me to the well, as a safety device, not to take part in the interview, of course, but to be seen by the person she was going to meet. If he'd already been concealed somewhere around the cenote, he would have supposed, when she sent me away, that I was waiting nearby as a bodyguard.

The *danzon* thumped its curious, stumbling rhythm. I thought of the impression of falseness Deborah had given to me when she asked me to go back to the hotel for her camera. Perhaps it hadn't been falseness. Perhaps it had merely been a sudden change of plan. At the last minute, her distrust of the man she had to meet had got stronger and, on an impulse, she had given me for safe-keeping the most crucial thing in her possession—the book.

That might explain, too, why she had been murdered. The person who had met her at the cenote had wanted the vital information hidden somehow in the detective story. She had stalled, made some feeble excuse for not having brought it, and he had killed her.

I imagined Halliday peering down through his shell-rimmed glasses at the silver hair streaming in the cenote. I imagined him stooping to grab up the red leather bag, searching it and finding nothing.

The *danzon* came to an end. Outside in the square, the sound of brass instruments blared over the pomping of a drum. I caught a glimpse of naked brown arms and violent blue and orange costumes. It was a parade, of football players, probably, demonstrating what a sport-loving race Mexico is.

The catch-as-catch-can of the last twenty-four hours took on a slightly comical aspect now. They had burgled me, slugged me and tried to kidnap me just to obtain a twenty-five-cent reprint of a detetctive story. And all the time Lena Snood had been reading it, tucked up in bed, happily lulling herself to sleep.

It was a relief to have something dop-

ed out at last. It was an even greater relief to have something definite to do. Because, obviously, the thing to do now was to get the book back from Lena Snood immediately.

I called: *"La cuenta, señorita"* to a group of waitresses huddled giggling together at the counter. My girl moved toward me, pulling a pencil out of her hairdo and scribbling on her check pad.

A thought came, sudden and jolting as a kick in the teeth. Last night, at the table in front of Halliday, Vera and the bridegroom, Mrs. Snood had talked about the book.

I remembered her birdy face, flushed with champagne. I heard her voice:

"It was terrible. The poor girl. Just before she died, she gave Peter a detective story. He lent it to me. Every time I read—"

Halliday, Vera, the bridegroom—the only people who could be involved in the murder, had all of them found out last night that it was Mrs. Snood and not I who had possession of "The Wrong Murder."

By that one trivial social remark, Lena Snood had put herself smack in the path of danger.

I paid my check with fumbling hands. At last I thought I understood Halliday's game last night. He had insisted on Mrs. Snood inviting me to the party because he still thought I had the book and had arranged for Junior to pick me up in the light blue sedan afterward. Perhaps Vera, too, if she was involved, had asked me to walk her home so that Junior would have a dark, deserted street in which to operate.

BUT once Lena Snood had given away the fact that she had the book, the interest had shifted to her. That's why Halliday had saved me from Junior whom he hadn't been able to warn of the change of plans, and that was why he had kept me all night at his place—to prevent me from contacting Lena Snood.

Because Halliday almost certainly thought I knew much more than I did. He probably thought I had deliberately given the book to Mrs. Snood as a clever ruse for keeping it safe.

I asked the waitress urgently: "Where's the telephone?"

She pointed with the pencil over her shoulder to a telephone by the open door. I ran to it, leafed through the hanging directory for the number of the Hotel Reforma and dialed.

Anything might have happened to that poor little woman from Newark. And, indirectly, it was my fault.

Mexican telephones have more temperament than sopranos. My dialing had not made contact. I dialed again and was greeted with an angry squawking sound. I dialed a third time. There was dead silence and then the soft moo of a connection. The music of the football parade outside was less loud, but loud enough to interfere with my hearing. I put a finger in my ear.

The connection broke. A bright female voice said: "Hotel Reforma. *Buenos dias.*"

"Mrs. Snood," I said. "Mrs. Lena Snood." I remembered the room number. "Seventy-four."

"Bueno?" said the voice, not understanding.

"Senora Snood," I shouted over the trumpet blasts. "Numero Seventy-four."

"One moment," the voice said in refined English. "I will connect you, sir."

A buzzing sounded. It went on and on as my spirits sank.

The voice came again in sing-song. "Sorry, sir, the party does not answer. Do you wish to leave a message?"

"No message."

I slammed down the receiver and hurried out into the square. Children were wrestling and rolling and scuttling about on the strip of drying grass under the statue of Washington. Cars swooped around the circle. I saw a taxi. It wasn't light blue. I hailed it and, jumping in, called:

"Luego, al Hotel Reforma."

The driver swerved into Londres. Ahead, completely blocking the thoroughfare, was the parade of blue and

orange football players. For two blocks we crawled after them while anxiety gnawed me. Then the driver turned into Calle Berlin and increased speed. In about two minutes, he drew up in front of the Reforma steps.

I paid him the exorbitant two-fifty pesos he demanded and ran into the lobby. Americans, all elaborately fixed up for their morning tours, were milling around, locating guides and being gypped. I glanced anxiously through them. There was no sign of Lena Snood's little indomitable figure.

I went to the desk. An elegant young man with an elegant mustache and a large amethyst ring moved along the counter to me.

I said: "I want Mrs. Snood. Do you know if she's in?"

"Mrs. Snood. The little lady, sir?" He indicated a little lady with his hand. "A green suit."

"Yes. That's it."

He shook his head. "Sorry, sir, she left just about half an hour ago."

AT least my darkest fears had not been realized. She hadn't died in the night. I asked: "Suppose you don't know where she went?"

"Why, yes, sir. She stopped to cash a traveler's check. A very friendly lady, sir. She told me she was going to the floating gardens of Xochimilco."

Of course, she'd told me that last night.

"With a guided party?"

He permitted himself an almost personal smile. "I think not, sir. She was telling me that she thought the guided parties—rather high, sir. She was going in a taxi."

That was Mrs. Snood all right. I was surprised she hadn't taken a bus.

On a wild hunch, I asked: "I don't imagine you noticed whether she was carrying a book?"

"Yes, sir, she was. She put it down on the desk while she was signing the traveler's check. I noticed it." He looked politely surprised. "Just a little book, sir. One of those little brightly colored detective stories." For a moment he stood watching me, apparently embarrassed. Then he coughed. "Excuse me, sir, but are you Mr. Duluth?"

"Yes," I said, suddenly suspicious. "Why?"

"The person you sent to inquire for Mrs. Snood was here just a moment ago, sir."

"The person?"

"The young boy, sir. The—er—messenger."

With a face like a flower and a gun on his hip! Junior.

I said quickly: "You told him where she'd gone?"

"Why, yes, sir. He said it was most important. That you were very eager to see her immediately." He was concerned. "Did I do something wrong, sir?"

I tried to smile. "No. It's nothing. Nothing at all. I'd almost forgotten I'd sent him."

At least she's got a twenty minute start, I thought. I tried to cling on to that fact for comfort.

At least she wasn't dead yet.

CHAPTER XIV

FROM the desk, I moved away through the clusters of elegantly dressed American tourists. Mrs. Snood had a twenty minutes start, but Junior had his light blue sedan. By speeding, he could reach Xochimilco almost as quickly as she.

My first impulse was to jump in a taxi and give chase. But I didn't trust my Spanish to cope with something as elaborate as a tail job. Then I thought of Vera Garcia. Either she was or she wasn't involved in the conspiracy. But even if she was, it was worth taking a risk for the use of the station wagon coupe.

I hurried to the group of telephone booths at the rear of the lobby. Vera's number was listed in the Ericsson direc-

tory. I called it and almost immediately she answered.

"Is Peter, no?" She sounded pleased and gay. "I expect you. Oh, last night I was so mad, yes? But today I am no more mad."

"That's nice," I said. "Listen, Vera, want to help me?"

"Oh, yes." Her voice clapped its hands. "Oh yes, yes."

"Then fine. Look. I'm at the Hotel Reforma. Come over right away—in the car. It's urgent."

"Right away I come."

"And make it snappy. Don't go ballerina and spend hours fixing yourself up."

"You want I come as I am?"

"Yes."

She giggled. "Just from the tub I am. I have not the clothes on. Not a thing. Bare, bare."

"Then put on some clothes, clothes."

"Yes, Peter. Quick."

I left the booth. I hurried out onto the hotel steps chewing on a cigarette. They had slugged me and tried to kidnap me just because they thought I had the book. They knew Lena had it. What would they do to her? Particularly if they thought she was my partner. I felt cold with apprehension.

I wished I had asked Vera if she owned a gun.

Cars streamed along the great show-off Paseo de La Reforma. Some Mexican movie actress drove up and ascended the steps to the hotel, putting on more dog than a Hollywood star of twenty years ago. Silver fox, toothy smiles, scurrying little groups of satellites.

The thump of a drum and the blare of trumpets sounded across the street. Soon the football parade showed up, winding into the Paseo, blue and orange, supermanly, but rather ragged in the formation.

I glanced at my watch. Ten minutes since I had called Vera. A station wagon coupe lurched dramatically out of the Calle Milan, crossed Reforma and swerved around to a near-crash landing at the foot of the hotel steps. The horn honked a brazen salute.

An arm in elegant dove gray was waving at me with vigor.

I ran down the steps and jumped in beside Vera.

"Atta girl," I said. "Xochimilco. The floating garden. And drive like you had S. Hurok after you."

She shot the car forward through the red light, and swung down the Paseo. She wasn't underestimating the urgency. She looked wonderful that morning. The dove gray suit fitted her like a scabbard and she'd had no time to junk it up with jewelry. She'd had no time for makeup either. Her skin was as clear as the morning sunlight. Sherry's Bar in the Metropolitan Opera House had given way to the Russian peasant village.

SUDDENLY I found myself wishing things were different, that there wasn't all this lethal running around, that there was just Vera.

As the car hurtled toward the suburbs, she turned from the wheel.

"Please to tell? Do we escape or do we pursue?"

"Right now we're pursuing."

"The boy with the cage of the bird?"

"Incidentally."

"Someone else?"

"Mrs. Snood."

"Mrs. Snood!" The long thick lashes batted over her eyes. "Is Mrs. Snood who push this girl in the cenote?"

Before I could answer, she added: "But you do not wish the questions. I know. I am good today. I am sorry for being mad. I just drive. Quick. quick."

She hurtled past a second-class bus stuffed with men, women, children and animals, giving her all to the station wagon. But she had started my mind down an entirely new line of thought. Until then I had never doubted the authenticity of Lena Snood with her dead real-estate husband, her lovely home in Newark and her two lovely intellectual daughters. She had been the symbol of good old American true-blueness. But why shouldn't she have been as plausible an actor as Halliday?

I thought of her back in Yucatan,

bringing me the cup of coffee in my room just after Deborah's death. She could have done it out of plain ordinary kindness. She could also have chosen it as an excuse for getting into my room. I thought of her chattering, fluttering around, picking up "The Wrong Murder."

She might have borrowed it innocently. But—she might just as well have been smarter than the others and realized, from the beginning, the book's importance.

I was so used to being suspicious that everything about Lena Snood suddenly turned itself inside out in my mind. Had she come to my apartment the day before as a spy? Had she invited me to the party in order to lure me to Junior with the light blue sedan? And had Junior, just now, taken my name in vain at the Reforma, not as her enemy but as her employee?

For the twentieth time in so many hours, the whole picture went topsy-turvy. Perhaps even her reference to the book at the party had been deliberate. A private message, to the red-headed bridegroom?

I felt the way some mad people must feel when there is no longer any way of distinguishing reality from fantasy.

It was past eleven, about twenty minutes after we had left the hotel, when we arrived in the run-down little village of Xochimilco. Ahead of us loomed the ancient pink-brown church with its preposterously long flying buttress.

Indian girls from the rich *chinampa* water meadows squatted in front of the iron railings of the market with great scarlet, pink and cream banks of the carnations which had made the town famous. Vera whirled past them and swung into the narrow road which led through crumbling adobe brick houses, bougainvillea-smothered and pig-infested, toward the primitive dock where the pleasure boats plied for hire.

The moment she parked, people crowded around the car, boat-owners, girls selling armfuls of posies, men selling leather riding whips and hideous religious bric-a-brac. We pushed through them toward the edge of the canal where the tourist ride started.

BELOW us on the calm, weed-green water, dozens of pleasure boats huddled together like a herd of water-cows. Antique punts with canopies against the sun on four spindly legs, they each had their name flauntingly embroidered across the canopy arch in flowers—*Rosita, Lupita, Amelia, Carmen.*

The banks were thronged with pleasure seekers, boat-renters and little boys trying to wangle a commission from someone—anyone. They were all chattering and laughing and bargaining like mad.

I searched through the milling crowd for Lena Snood. There was no sign of her. I hadn't expected it, of course. By now she would be somewhere out on the canals—if she had arrived safely.

We were surrounded by straw-hatted boat-renters, slight dark Indians in white cotton pants with white cotton shirts knotted over their brown stomachs. They were all of them jabbering, pointing out individual boats, quoting prices.

"Describe Mrs. Snood to them," I asked Vera. "Find out if anyone's seen her. An American woman, alone."

Vera began to talk in Spanish. The men crowded even closer.

"A green suit," I said.

Several of the men started to talk at once. A little boy tugged at my sleeve and held up for sale an insane, wooden horse's head painted silver. The clumsy boats with their gaudy floral decorations swung listlessly back and forth in a slight breeze. So did the tall, silver-green trees, like poplars, on the opposite bank of the canal.

One of the men around Vera, a wrinkled old Indian with a rent in his shirt, had taken the spotlight. The others, sensing his success, were dwindling away in search of other customers.

"She's here." Vera turned from him to me. "He saw the little American

woman in the green suit arrive alone in a taxi about quarter of an hour ago. She take the boat of his friend—the *Carmelita.*"

"Alone?" I asked.

"Yes, alone."

Relief poured through me. "Okay. Does he have a boat, this guy?"

"Yes." Vera pointed. "The *Lupita.* Is his."

"Then let's go."

Vera started to bargain. I cut in:

"Give him anything. Tell him to pole like the devil. We'll pay double when we find her."

I started down the bank with Vera and the Indian after me. The *Lupita* was lying offshore in the middle of the canal. We hurried through the other boats, using them as a bridge, and reached it.

Under the canopy were two wooden chairs and a wooden table. We ducked into them. The old Indian released the mooring rope, picked up his long punting pole and started to push us forward down the boat-strewn canal.

It was Sunday, the great gala day of the week in Xochimilco when everyone comes out from Mexico City to drift along through the flowery water meadows, to eat and drink and dance and sing to the music of the floating orchestras. Ahead of us, the boats were thick as butterflies in a summer garden.

A boatload of recently embarked musicians passed us, the men in their brilliant *mariachi* costumes settling themselves on chairs and tuning their instruments. A girl in a canoe heaped high with red and white poppies glided past us from some remote backwater garden on her way to the market.

I BEGAN to feel relaxed. The danger was almost negligible now. Nothing could happen to Mrs. Snood here on the noisy canals. All we had to do was to catch up with her.

The *mariachis* had started to play. Over the frenzied twang of guitars, a deep, chesty baritone was extolling Guadalajara. The melody was caught up from all the boats around.

I let my hand trail in the cool, dark canal. Water weeds as small and round as green confetti brushed against my fingers.

Tomorrow night I would be in New York with Iris. I tried to imagine it. I began to wonder if I would miss Vera. The realization that I was almost through with Mexico spread a veil of unreality over the whole mystery. Probably, even with the book, I would never know what it had all been about. Probably I would never know whether Vera was just a nice little ballerina with a temper or a—what? The entire episode would dissolve from my mind like a dream.

Suddenly the boatman shouted: *"La Carmelita,"* and started to punt at double the speed. We lurched forward, past the *Viva Mexico* where a fat Mexican couple were precariously dancing a rumba, past the boat load of *mariachis.*

I climbed out into the blunt bow of the *Lupita,* leaning ahead to look. I saw the nose of the *Carmelita.* Then I caught a glimpse of green.

The boatman gave a final violent plunge with the pole. We outdistanced the boats in between and slid right alongside the boat of his friend.

I waved, grinned and opened my mouth to speak, then I closed it.

An American woman was sitting in the other punt. A small American woman in a jade green suit. As we almost collided, she started and swung round toward me. I looked at her. She looked at me. Her hair was snow-white. Rimless pince-nez wabbled disapprovingly on a thin, spinsterish nose.

This was the one thing I had never anticipated.

She was a little American woman in a green suit, okay. But she wasn't Lena Snood.

I couldn't blame the boatman. How could he be expected to tell one green-dressed gringo woman from another? But a kind of panic came over me. Had Junior caught up with Lena Snood before she reached Xochimilco? Was it already too late?

It didn't seem likely. Lena would have been in a taxi with a twenty-minute start. Even if Junior had overtaken her, brash as he was, I doubted if he would have staged a hold-up in front of a taxi driver. Certainly he couldn't have harmed her in the crowd on the dock. It was much more probable that she was here somewhere on the canal, but further ahead.

The regular canal trip was almost an hour. We hadn't a prayer of catching up with her in the lumbering *Lupita*. We'd have to get back to the landing stage and wait to intercept her there.

I said to Vera: "Tell him to get back to the dock and make it snappy."

The boatman seemed to have entered into the spirit of this crazy American idea of fun. He knew every inch of the territory, poling ferociously through obscure little side canals, he cut off a good two-thirds of the trip and brought us into the last lap of the tourist run in less than ten minutes.

WHEN we reemerged into the main canal, the congestion was even worse than it had been further back.

The boatman was sweating now, but he kept on manfully, pushing us forward in spite of angry expostulations from other boatmen. I kept in the bow, standing, clinging to the flower-decorated post that held up the canopy.

The musicians in a *mariachi* boat ahead of us were singing and yiping and brandishing their hats.

> Cucurucu, me cantan las palomas.
> Tralalala, me canta el trobador.

We were reaching a bend, the last bend before the dock. Sideswiping a boat with a photographer and almost knocking his camera into the canal, we made the bend and turned it.

There were a flock of new boats ahead and, beyond them, the dock where we had embarked.

"Cucurucu!" yelled the musicians.

Three girls in the boat in front of me sat with their arms entwined around each other's waists, their black hair hanging loose down their backs.

"Cucurucu!" they sang.

I stretched up, trying to look around their canopy. One of them rolled her eyes at me and tossed a carnation. All three burst into a gale of giggling, mermaid laughter.

A boat was drawing up at the dock. I couldn't see its occupant. Then there was a sudden movement and I caught a glimpse of shrill green.

My heart did a handspring. There was more green. And then, I saw all of her. There was no doubt, no doubt at all.

Lena Snood was standing on the bank. She was a good fifty yards away, but I could see her in every detail. There was a pink camelia pinned in her untidy hair. In one hand she was carrying a great bunch of scarlet carnations.

She was fumbling in her bag. She brought out money and paid her boatman. She turned then and started up the bank. From behind, I could just see a glimpse of something small and bright tucked under her arm.

"The Wrong Murder" by Craig Rice.

In my eagerness, I climbed further forward into the bow, lost my balance and half-slipped overboard, one leg plunging into the water. The three girls in front of me giggled.

Although I was too far away for her to hear, I let out a blaring:

"Lena!"

The three girls chorused in mocking treble unison:

"Lena, Lena!"

Once again their gale of laughter swept up.

"Quick!" I said to Vera. "She's there. Tell him to break his back."

> Cucurucu, me cantan las palomas.
> Tralalala, me canta el trobador.

The stupid, infectious tune was tossing around from one boat to another. Damn the music. If there wasn't so much racket, I might have been able to make Lena hear.

CHAPTER XV

LENA had left the boat now and was plodding purposefully up the bank. If she got to a taxi before we made the dock, we were sunk.

Cucurucu . . .

I shouted again and the three girls mimicked me from behind now, like an echo. I took out a white handkerchief and waved it wildly as if I were at a bull-fight. Lena Snood's back was to me. She did not turn.

She was halfway up the bank now, easily distinguishable in the throng by the vivid green of her suit. Suddenly she stopped. I saw her turn and talk to someone who had addressed her.

I couldn't see who it was. Not at first. A large woman in black with two children blocked my view. I saw Lena gesticulating and shaking her head, bargaining. Either she was buying something or she was dickering for a taxi. I prayed that she should be buying something.

Then the woman, dragging a child in either hand, lumbered away, and I saw who it was Mrs. Snood was talking to.

I saw the glossy black hair gleaming with brilliantine in the sunshine. I saw the chunky man's shoulder on the short, kid's body. I even could see the smooth, high-cheeked, pretty curve of the cheek.

I wasn't near enough to see the eyes, the big, swooning, beautiful eyes. But I felt a cold shiver up my spine.

Junior!

Our punt had got caught up in another snarl of craft around a *mariachi* boat. We were at a standstill. The bass viol grunted. The guitars pulsed in a frenzied Veracruzana-Cubano rhythm. A high tenor voice was screaming:

Se Murio, mi gallo twerto,
Se Murio, mi gallo twerto,
Solo yo, en la gallina.

"Lena," I shouted. "Lena Snood!"

I could hear my voice drawn into the music and tossed away. I thought wildly of jumping into the water and swimming. It wouldn't have helped. There was nothing I could do about the distance and the racket and the crowd.

Lena Snood was nodding her head in agreement with Junior. She had okayed the taxi fare.

She started up the bank again. Junior went respectfully a few paces behind her. Vera was at my side in the bow now. She had seen and caught on too.

"Mrs. Snood!" she shrieked. "Mrs. Snood! Leeeena!"

"Se murio. . . ."

Junior caught up with Mrs. Snood at the top of the rise. They walked off together out of sight.

It took us five minutes to get to the dock. I threw the sweating incredulous boatman fifty pesos and ran up the bank. Vera came after me. There was hardly a chance that the light blue sedan should still be in sight. I realized that. And I was right.

I hurried to get to the station wagon while Vera inquired through the crowd. They had seen Junior drive off, but it did not help because there was only one road from the quay to the center of the town. At the market place they could have turned in any direction. I drove like a demon down the ruined street back to the center of town.

VERA got out again to ask among the flower sellers. They tried to woo her with violets; they brandished carnations at her. Some of the girls ran to the car and, smiling, cozening, pushed posies of sweetheart roses and forget-me-nots at me through the open window.

"Lindas flores, jovencito. Finas rositas. Frescitas, marchancito."

They hadn't seen anything. They were only interested in pesos.

From there the roads led in three different directions, one back to Mexico City, the other two into the country. I got out, too. We stopped everyone and asked. After a while, I knew it was hopeless. Those five minutes had done as much damage as five hours.

I toyed desperately with the idea of

calling the police but I abandoned it almost at once. The danger for Lena was mortal, but it was immediate. Even if we were able to convince the police with our unlikely story, it would be far too late to stop what was happening or going to happen in that light blue sedan.

The only possible lead I had was Halliday's apartment on Calle Dinamarca. It seemed improbable that they would take Lena there, but any objective was better than none. I started to drive furiously back to Mexico City.

That bad morning had done one good thing. It had swept away the last cobwebs of my suspicions of Vera. If she had been in this thing with Halliday, she would never have answered my call to arms so promptly. Or be so worried now.

On the drive back I told her everything I knew. It could do no harm. Certainly I wasn't getting anywhere playing the lone wolf. She was intelligent and much less dramatic about it than I had expected and I found it a great relief to have an ally. She had a gun, she said—a relic from the "poor old man" who had been neurotically afraid of burglars. We decided to pick it up before I went to Halliday's.

She wanted to go with me. But I vetoed that.

We passed my apartment on the way to her house. My pants' leg was still unpleasantly wet. I stopped off to change and arranged for her to bring the gun there. As I opened my apartment door, I saw a piece of paper lying on the carpet. I picked it up. It was the confirmation of my flight. The New York plane left at seven-thirty in the morning. I was to be at the airport at six-thirty.

As I changed my suit, anxiety for Lena was almost unbearable. Soon the buzzer sounded and Vera hurried up the stairs.

"Got it?" I asked.

"Yes, yes." She came into the apartment and took a little Colt thirty-two out of her pocketbook. She handed it to me. "Is all right?"

I examined it. It was loaded. I slipped it into my pocket.

As I did so, the telephone rang. I hurried to pick up the receiver.

"Peter Duluth here."

A voice sounded at the other end of the wire. I stiffened. It was a familiar voice with a thick New York twang and it was gay and sprightly as ever.

"Peter, thank heavens you're in."

"Lena! Where on earth—"

I heard Vera gasp. Lena Snood's voice rattled on: "Really, it's most mortifying. I'm a damsel in distress. If you can be a damsel after fifty."

I glanced at Vera. "What is it, Lena?"

"Well, I did go to Xochimilco this morning and there was still plenty of time so I decided to go to the pyramid at Tlalpam too. You know? Cuicuilco. It's in the guide book. It's supposed to be worthwhile. I think it stinks."

"Yes."

"And I'm stuck, Peter. The driver tried to gyp me, tried to charge double for waiting while I saw the wretched pyramid so I sent him away. Now, I can't get another one. It's miles from anywhere. I guess there's buses, but I can't make people understand. Oh, I'm just a helpless old hag. But how about getting hold of Vera and the station wagon and coming to rescue me?"

IT was a lie, of course. I could feel danger bristling around the phone. But what sort of a lie? Had my wild hunch been right? Had Lena from the beginning been the real antagonist. Was she there at the phone with Junior at her side, luring us into a trap?

Or was Junior there, yes—but with a gun in her ribs?

I didn't dare put the question up to Lena. If she was a crook, it would be disastrous to let her know I was suspicious.

I said cautiously: "What do you want me to do, Lena?"

"Just rescue me, please. I'm calling from some store. Heavens knows where it is. It. . . . Oh, I can't explain. I'd better walk back to the pyramid. That's easier. I'll wait for you on the pyramid."

She laughed. "After all, if it's a beauty spot I might as well get my money's worth."

"Where is it?"

"It's a cinch. Take the road to Tlalpam. Just before you hit it, there's a little dump called Peña Pobre. It's right there. Ask anyone." Her voice became rueful. "Peter, I hate to be so stupid. You sure you don't mind?"

I'd tried to catch some sort of a hint from her voice. I couldn't. Maybe, just maybe, it was a little feverish in its gaiety. I couldn't be sure. I had to make my decision. I made it.

"Okay, Lena," I said. "I'll be right there."

"Shouldn't take you more than half an hour. I'll be waiting on the pyramid."

"Okay."

"And Peter?"

"Yes."

"You can see it from the road. It's got a figure like mine—like a cinnamon bun. You can't miss it."

"Sure. I'll be there."

"Thank heavens." She gave a squeaky laugh. "Will I be pleased when as and if I ever get back to Newark!"

I put the receiver back on the stand. That last sentence lingered on in my mind. "When as and if." Was that a cry for help? Was that the gun in the ribs?

Vera said: "Tell me."

I told her.

She said: "It's a trap."

"Of course it's a trap."

"And they want me, too?"

"I guess they've figured you're my buddy. I'm a dangerous guy to be around."

"This Snood! She does not know we see her at Xochimilco with this boy. She is all the time the villain. She thinks up this excuse to lure us."

"Could be. Could be they forced her to call, too. That's why I'm going."

"Going? Are you crazy?"

"Maybe. It's a fifty-fifty chance they've kidnaped her. I'm not letting that poor little woman take my rap."

"But, Peter—"

"Shut up," I said. "You stay here. I'll take the station wagon."

She tossed back the thick black hair. "If you go, I go."

"Now, Vera—"

"I go, I say." She stamped her foot again. "You know what you want. I know what I want. You need the driver. Anything may happen."

"Exactly. Nothing's going to happen to you because of me."

"I go."

"No."

"Yes."

"If you take the car, I scream 'thief' for the police."

I knew when I was licked. I liked her for it. My new ally was crazy, of course, but she had nerve.

"Okay, honeybunch, let's go."

"What is it, this—"

"Darling," I said.

CHAPTER XVI

EVENING clouds of the wild variety, which often come in Mexico City, were spreading gustily across the sky. Daylight was fading. By the time we started toward Tlalpam, the city was sliding into a cold, colorless dusk.

Vera was driving. She knew the city and its outskirts well. She even knew the pyramid at Peña Pobre. Cuicuilco.

I had seen a photograph of it once and it had given me the creeps. It isn't really a pyramid. It is a low, squat mound built out of field stones with broad ramps spiraling up it. None of the archeologists agree as to when it was built or why, but it is the oldest building in America. Some sort of horrid civilization must have thrived there until an eruption poured lava over it centuries ago. Only the mound remains. An occasional conscientious sight-seer takes a trip out, but it has never made the tourist grade. It is too cheerless.

As we sped through the ominous twilight down the Acapulco highway, we

worked out a plan. Vera told me that the mound was dumped down in the middle of barren lavaland. There was a shack where the caretaker, provided by the Department of the Preservation of National Monuments, collected entrance fees. Otherwise there were no buildings within a half-mile. A single track led there from Peña Pobre.

Since they had no reason to know we were suspicious of them, they would almost certainly be expecting us to arrive up the regular track from Peña Pobre. But Vera knew there was another road which ran past the back of the mound, and came within less than a quarter of a mile of it. I decided to park the car there and slip up on foot to the pyramid from behind.

The closer we reached our destination, the more I realized how crazy I was being. I was deliberately heading into a trap, and a trap set by an unscrupulous man with the mind of a Machievelli.

If I hadn't been stubbornly sure of my own ability to tell an honest person, I would probably have turned back.

But the more I thought about Lena Snood, the more I liked her and the more certain I was of her honesty. I liked her generosity. I liked her kindness. I even liked her messed-up hair and her terrible taste in corsages. I convinced myself that she had been forced into making the telephone call. I was certain, too, that, knowing what she must know about them by now, she was only being kept alive as bait for Vera and me.

I'd never be happy in New York with Iris if, because I'd walked out on her, Mrs. Snood didn't get back to her lovely intellectual daughters and her lovely home in Newark.

We were out in the country now, passing through that dusty, ugly landscape with which so much of the city is surrounded. Night was closing down. Lights were already blinking in the straggle of buildings which marked the outermost fringes of Mexico City. It was a gray, amorphous period, not day not night.

Soon all houses dropped away. Sparse vegetation, tufted weeds, sickly scrub bushes and cactus thrust up from a rocky wasteland. A little canal trickled at the roadside and beyond the canal was a fringe of eucalyptus trees.

"We're almost there," said Vera.

She turned off the headlights. A minute or so later, she eased the car into the shadow of a clump of eucalyptus. She pointed across the lava plain, but I had already seen Cuicuilco. It loomed a couple of hundred yards away, fat, bulging, black against the sky in the gathering darkness.

I TOOK the gun from my pocket and got out of the car.

"Keep the engine running and wait."

"Be careful—for the God's sake."

"I'll be careful."

I jumped the little canal and headed into the scrubland. My clothes were dark. They merged into the vague surroundings. I doubted if anyone had seen the car's approach. The only thing to do was to ease as near as possible and hope that Lena Snood would be visible. If they were using her as a bait, she probably would be. Perhaps I could signal her to try to escape.

After about a hundred feet of rough territory which I crossed, bent low, the ground dropped into a shallow gulley like a minature canyon. I ducked into it gratefully. I could walk upright there without risk of being seen from the mound. It was even darker down here, almost night. Crickets, or some sort of evening insects, were humming like telephone wires around me. It was bleak, dead, dismal country. It went with Cuicuilco.

As I moved cautiously forward, skirting the gnarled roots of stunted trees and the viciously-spined low cactuses, I started for the first time to feel jittery. I was banking everything on Lena Snood's innocence. If I was wrong about her, God knew what could happen.

The gulley took a sharp turn to the left, away from the mound. It was no more use to me. With the gun in my hand, I crept up the sloping side until the mound came into view. I judged it

to be less than a hundred yards away.

It wasn't high. Only about fifty feet. And I could see no detail—just the walls that supported the ramps. It was evil. That was the only word for it.

I swung myself out of the gulley, lay flat on the coarse, prickly grass and peered through the gloom at the prehistoric hulk. There was no visible movement except for the listless swaying of a thin shrub etched against the sky. I wondered what they had done with the caretaker, or whether the caretaker went somewhere else after dark.

And then, after a moment or so, I thought I detected a faint movement in the shadows on the third ramp nearest the top. My heart skittered. I peered more intently and was sure. Something had come around the curve of the ramp and was moving toward the right. Suddenly it stopped. A match flared and was extinguished. The red point of a cigarette showed in the gloom.

It was a person all right.

Tensely I watched the cigarette tip move to the right. I tried to gauge from its height whether the smoker was tall or short. I decided he or she was short. Lena Snood was short. So was Junior. But since they were setting a trap and expecting us any minute, they wouldn't be fools enough to let a lighted cigarette show unless they wanted us to see it.

I banked on that. Although I could see nothing but the vague impression of movement and the moving cigarette, I decided that the cigarette was Lena Snood.

The bait. . . .

I waited until the cigarette had disappeared around the curve of the ramp. Then I began to ease my way over the rugged scrubland. I'd done some jungle fighting in New Guinea in the war. The technique of stealth came back to me. The crickets were yelling as if conscious of my movements, and giving a warning.

AS I came nearer to the base of the mound, the figure appeared again from the left. I could see it now in dim outline clearly enough to recognize it as a human being. After a few steps it stopped and the cigarette dropped to the ground. I heard a cough and a little exclamation:

"Ho, hum."

Excitement fizzled in me. Even from those meaningless monsyllables I could recognize the voice.

It was Lena Snood all right.

Pressed silent against the ground I made a plan. Lena was the bait, I told myself, a poor little woman who had tried to get her money's worth out of her Mexican trip, and who had been tossed into life-and-death danger by forces outside her control.

She had been forced to walk around the ramp, on view, with her cigarette. At the top of the mound were excavations. Vera had told me that. They would make an ideal ambush. Junior was probably up there with a gun aimed on her. If there were two of them or more, another man would be waiting on the far side of the mound to cover the regular track from Peña Pobre, waiting for our car.

Another match flared and faded on the ramp. Another burning cigarette glowed. Lena Snood started again on her circular tour. I wondered what was in her mind up there with a gun trained on her, knowing she was being used to inveigle her friends into a trap. Was she thinking about me? Or Newark?

Anger swallowed up the rest of the thought. She shouldn't be here. She should be drinking Daiquiris in the Reforma lounge, telling other people how expensive they were.

A great, cheerful star was blazing in a night sky. Venus? It hung to the right of the mound. I started forward again, slithering over shrub roots, skirting high, thorny cactus.

I almost reached the base of the mound and cursed under my breath. The archeologists had dug a dry moat through the lava to expose the mound base. It separated me from the lowest wall. It wasn't particularly deep or particularly wide, but it made a real hazard

against Lena's getaway.

I thought of edging around the pyramid in the hope that the moat would stop. But it was too dangerous. If I moved much to the right or the left, I might get into the orbit of the man guarding the track from Peña Pobre.

I had to make the best of what there was.

Above me, to the left, I could see Mrs. Snood's vague little form and the burning cigarette. Curse the cigarette. It made a target. She was coming toward me. In a few seconds, she would be immediately above me.

I half opened my mouth, ready to give the signal, swallowing to clear my throat. I kept my finger on the trigger of the Colt.

One . . . two . . . three. . . . She was directly above, about thirty feet up.

"Lena," I whispered. "Lena, it's Peter."

The sound of my voice almost deafened me. There was an echo. It picked up the whisper and tossed it around the pyramid like the hiss of a giant snake.

She had stopped dead above me.

"Run," I whispered, cursing the echo. "To the main road. Vera's there. The car."

The snake hissed again. The air all around that monstrous devil's bun seethed with the sound of my voice.

Lena was still rigid above.

"Run, Lena! Drop the cigarette. Run!"

SUDDENLY she gave a little cry as if the emotion in her, pent up so long, was stronger than her will.

"Peter!" she screamed.

The scream was like the yell of a thousand devils rocking around the pyramid.

There was nothing I could do about it now.

"Peter!" she screamed again. "Look out! He's behind you. Quick!"

Instinct in me reacted to her warning. I dropped flat on my stomach. Instantly a shot rang out from the darkness behind me. Lena had been right. One of them must have detected me and been stalking me through the scrubland. Her shout had probably saved my life.

I swung round and sent an answering shot through the darkness. Above me on the pyramid Lena had started to run along the ramp. She hadn't heard what I'd said about the cigarette or it hadn't registered. She still clutched it, waving it like a beacon.

"Drop the cigarette!" I yelled.

As I did, two more shots rang out. This time they came from the top of the mound. I saw Lena's cigarette spurt through the air like a firefly. There was a high, shrilling cry. And no more running footsteps.

Cold with anxiety, I sent another shot into the dark scrubland behind me. I heard a vague curse, then a scurrying. Dimly I caught a glimpse of a figure dashing away through the cactuses over the lavaland toward the Peña Pobre track.

I'd scared him away. A couple of shots and he was running like a fool. I sent a third shot after him, but I couldn't give chase. There was Lena to think of—the cry, the thudding footsteps which had suddenly stopped.

I leaped down into the dry moat. Clinging to jagged stones, I swung myself up onto the first ramp. There was no sound now. Nothing. Unless the whine of the crickets was sound. There were two more ramps before I could reach Lena—and a second gunman at the top of the mound.

I climbed the next wall to the next ramp. I climbed to the third. I stood for the fraction of a second, silhouetted against the sky, deliberately presenting myself as a target.

But nothing happened. I fired at the top of the mound. There was no answering shot.

Had the second man run away too?

Not caring any more, I dashed down the ramp toward the place where Lena must be. The single star was blazing. It gave a sort of false, miniature moonlight. Ahead, the ramp curved around the stone wall. Something was there, something on the curve, dark, huddled

on the ground.

I ran to it. I dropped down. I heard a little moan. My hand went out and touched hair. It moved on and touched something else, smooth, waxy.

The camellia. The pink camellia Lena Snood had bought in Xochimilco.

My heart seemed caught up in my throat.

"Lena!"

I slid my arm around her and eased her into a sitting position. I couldn't see her, not really, only a vague blur that was her face and something pale, dangling; a hand.

She stirred in my arms. "Peter?"

"Yes, Lena. It's okay. It's me."

"Peter." The voice was thin, like a ghost's voice. "I had to do it. They made me. They made me phone you. I—"

"I know, Lena. I know."

FAR off in the Peña Pobre direction, I heard a car start. Fury, such as I'd never known fury before, took me by the scruff of the neck and shook me. They had expected me to walk meekly into the trap. Because I'd come with a gun, I'd scared them off. They were flying for their lives with their job half-done.

They'd shot Lena. That was their speed—to shoot a little woman with no way of defending herself. But they had run from a guy with a gun.

"Peter—"

It wasn't really "Peter." It was a blur of sound trying to be "Peter." She went heavy against my arm. I couldn't see where they had shot her. I couldn't see anything. But I knew they'd done what they wanted to do.

She wasn't going to be able to tell me what she knew.

My mouth was like lava ash. I was trembling, out of control. I wanted to kill them. If they'd been there I'd have done it, picked them up with my naked hands and split their skulls against the stones.

"Lena," I managed. "Lena, don't worry. It's okay."

But she didn't answer. The body slumped back on my arm. Somewhere, off on the road, a shot rang out. I hardly heard it. Certainly I didn't think about it.

I lit a match. Then, before it illuminated Lena Snood's face, I shook it out.

What was the point of looking at her?

I didn't want to look at a woman that I knew was dead.

CHAPTER XVII

NATURALLY I had to see, of course. I lit another match. The frail light flickered. As I looked down, I forced myself not to feel. Both shots had got her, one through the heart, the other lower down. Lucky marksmanship.

Lucky!

I looked around. The detective story wasn't there. Or the carnations. They had of course taken her to some other place first, from which they had made her telephone me. They had the book now. They had brought her here only as a lure to trap us.

And they had been too cowardly to make any real effort to get us. A couple of shots from a man in the dark and they had scuttled away.

I let the match burn out. Anger surged up again, half-choking me. I'd done what I could. But what was the use of saying that? Maybe I'd killed her. Maybe if I hadn't come, they'd have let her live.

I thought: "She's lying here dead on a desolate old Mexican pyramid. She's never going back to Newark."

But even pity for her couldn't grow in the heat of my fury.

Then slowly, as I crouched in the darkness, with the crickets scything around me, I regained some sort of control and remembered the shot which had sounded from the road. They must have fired at Vera. That was the only explanation. It was typical of them, too, to fire at an unarmed woman while they

ran away from me.

I jumped up, urged into activity by a new anxiety. There was nothing I could do for Lena. It was Vera now who needed me. I swung myself off the wall and dropped to the ramp below. I scrambled down the other two ramps, pulled myself up out of the moat and started to run, tripping and stumbling, across the cactus wasteland, in the direction of the road.

I wasn't thinking. There was too much hate and anger in me for that. Ahead, against the sky, I could see the clump of eucalyptus trees which marked the edge of the road. I reached them. The dark station wagon was parked where it had been when I left. Vera wasn't at the wheel.

The anxiety welling up, I called: "Vera."

Her voice answered immediately from beyond the car. I hurried around it and found her squatting by the back wheel. A jack and an extra wheel were lying on the road at her side. She got up and ran to me.

"They shot the car as they go by. They shoot to puncture the tire, to stop us from following. But I change the wheel. Is ready."

"But you're all right?"

"Yes, yes. But the scream, the shots—"

Relief that she was unhurt floated somewhere above my horror at Lena's death. "Who was in the car?"

"The boy, Junior, he is driving. But there is another. In the back. I see the hat of the man. No more. It is he who shoot."

"Halliday."

"But Lena?"

I said: "Lena's dead."

"Dead."

"She called out to warn me. She saved my life. She ran with a cigarette. They shot her."

Now, in my numbing anger, I was obsessed with Halliday. Why had I ever tried to complicate the picture? The truth had always been simple. Deborah Brand had been escaping from Halliday. She had fled from him to Chichen. He had wanted the detective story. She had not given it to him. He had killed her.

And now he had killed Lena.

SUDDENLY I couldn't control myself any more. I started to shake.

"They shot her down like a dog. She didn't have a chance. And it's my fault. I—I—"

"Peter." Vera took my arm. "Is not your fault. What are you? The Joan of Arc that you have to save the world? You did what you could. You risk your own life."

But I could only think of Lena sprawled back there in the wilderness on that evil mound, alone with one pink camellia for a wreath.

I said: "I've got to go back to her."

"No." Vera's voice was sharp. "Leave her alone."

I broke away from her and started toward the trees. She ran after me.

"Peter, you are half-crazy from the shock. What can you do? Take the body to the police? You think they believe when you come on with a body and your story? Leave her, I say."

"I can't leave her."

"But she is dead. Is terrible, but is true. Is like the poor old man in the cemetery. Does he smell the lilies, the tuberoses? Come." She was pulling me toward the car. "Later, when we get back to town, I call from the booth to tell them to find her, to take care of the body. But don't go back now."

Her words registered enough to make me realize that I was acting like a clown. There was absolutely nothing to be gained by going back to where Lena lay. And, with our elaborate and implausible story, there was little good in going to a foreign police force congenitally suspicious of Americans.

This had gone far beyond the point where it could be turned over to the police.

I felt as exhausted as if I'd run ten miles. But I was sensible again. I picked up the spare wheel and the jack and put them back in the car. Then I followed

Vera inside. As she started to drive back to town, I only half-listened to her voice rambling on. I knew she was talking to distract me from myself. But I was calm now, and I knew what I had to do.

Once we got back to Mexico City, I would go to Halliday's apartment, smoke him out. The time had come to turn the tables, to be hunter for a change instead of a fugitive.

"Peter." Vera's voice broke into my thoughts.

"Yes, Vera."

"Listen."

"I'm listening."

"From Mrs. Snood they get this book and yet still they want to lure us in the trap. Why?"

"To kill us."

"No. If they want to kill us, why do they not kill me when I am there in the car alone? Or you at the mound? Or earlier, in the convent? Is something else. Even with the book, they do not get what they want. There is more."

"More?"

"They think you know more. That is why they want to lure you to the pyramid, to get you and make you tell. Think, Peter. This Deborah Brand, you are sure she not tell or give you something else?"

"Sure."

"Think. Tell me everything. Begin from the beginning. Everything. We try and think."

It was something to do, something to keep me from thinking about how I wanted to kill Halliday. While we sped through the dark suburbs, I tried to reconstruct everything Deborah had said to me from the original pickup through the time she had rubbed my back to the other time when she had spent the night, and to the final walk to the cenote.

VERA kept prodding me with questions.

"She tell you she was going to Mexico City?"

"That's what she said."

"But you never see the tickets she say she have of the plane?"

"No. They weren't in her pocketbook either."

"Then perhaps she lie."

"Sure."

"She mention the father, the Finn, the archeologist in Peru. She mention the American mother who is dead. Never she mention who she was going to see? The brother, the sister, the aunt, the uncle?

When she said "uncle" a faint recollection stirred. I struggled to grasp it. Tantalizingly, there remained that sensation of something just beyond the edge of my consciousness. Then, without the slightest reason, it seemed, the remark Vera had made a few minutes sprang back into my mind.

"What are you? The Joan of Arc?"

Joan of Arc—uncle! The crazy combination of images stuck. Then suddenly I knew why. I remembered Deborah lying behind the mosquito netting of the other bed in Chichen Itzá. Deborah, half-asleep, as I had thought, murmuring gibberish.

"Birds in the road. Waiting for their lovers. Joan of Arc crowned him in Fourteen-sixty-two."

That had been the date, hadn't it?

"Crowned who?"

"My uncle."

"That must have been nice for him."

"It was. A new Joan of Arc. Don't tell. Ever. It's a secret."

Vera glanced at me expectantly. "What happens? You think of something?"

"Maybe I do. It's crazy. Something she said when I thought she was half-asleep. She was muttering a lot of nonsense. Then she said it."

I told Vera. She looked blank. "The new Joan of Arc crowns the uncle? What is this? Is foolish."

Excitement pricked me. "Who did Joan of Arc crown?"

"What do I know of this Joan of Arc?"

I knew. "She crowned the Dauphin of France. She crowned him in Orleans. A new Joan of Arc. In New Orleans,

there's a Dauphine Street."

She was excited now. "Yes? But—"

"Fourteen-sixty-two. I can't remember when Joan of Arc crowned him, but it wasn't then. It was somewhere in the thirteen hundreds. 'Don't tell anyone,' she said. 'It's a secret.' Maybe we've got it. Maybe she was telling me where she was headed—to her uncle, Mr. Brand, Fourteen-twenty-eight Dauphine Street, New Orleans."

"But why in the riddle? If she want to tell you, she tell you. Why so complicated with the Joan of Arc?"

I thought I saw. "Perhaps it wasn't meant to mean anything to me then. Deborah knew she was in great danger. Perhaps when she was lying there, she suddenly thought it might be a good idea to build me up as a possible understudy in case she failed to get through herself."

"But why in the riddle?" Vera repeated.

"Because that way, in case she didn't need me, it wouldn't have given anything away. But if she did need me later, once she'd given me the detective story and I'd examined it, maybe the whole Joan of Arc business would have become plain."

"And this explains why they are all the time so eager to kidnap you? And why now they run away when you come with the gun. They are not cowards. They want you alive. They are afraid with the shooting they kill you."

"I guess so."

"They have the book, but without this information the book is no use. They do not know the address. They do not know where she was going?"

I WAS increasingly sure we had blundered on the truth. This way, everything Deborah Brand had done made sense. Something of great importance was at stake. I'd realized that ever since Halliday had started to make my life miserable. Deborah, torn between a necessary desire to distrust everyone and the realization of her own great danger, had done the only thing she could have done. She had told the only available person something which would have meant nothing unless she decided later to hand over the book. She had been grooming me in case of need.

The need had come.

And if I had been smarter and examined "The Wrong Murder" before Lena had taken it, I might have justified Deborah's faith in me.

And Lena would never have died.

We were heading into the city now. Deborah's sad little silver-haired ghost seemed very near. I still hadn't the faintest idea of what she had been trying to do but, having had experience with her enemies, I was on her side. There was no doubt about that.

As the car sped on, a new idea began to form. Wasn't there still a chance of doing something of what she had wanted me to do, or at least of frustrating Halliday? New Orleans was on my plane route home. If I stopped over there for a couple of hours, I could go to see Mr. Brand. I could give him nothing and tell him hardly more, but I could at least warn him of what had happened to his niece.

My mind made itself up. I said: "Vera, tomorrow I'm going to New Orleans."

She took it calmly as if she'd expected me to say that. "And I come too."

"You?"

"I begin. I finish."

"Now, Vera—"

Her eyes flashed. "Always it is this, 'Now, Vera.' You do not want me for love. That I know. Only you love this—this woman in New York. But you think I am the female dog? The pat on the head? Then the kick in the bottom? I begin. I finish."

I opened my mouth, but she cut in:

"You say, 'Now Vera' again and I scream. Here in Mexico is danger for me, too. Thanks to you, they shoot at me. You want to leave me here to be shot with bullets like poor little Mrs. Snood? Pouf."

I didn't argue any more because I realized that I wanted her to come. Once I reached New York, I'd probably never

see her again. I liked that idea increasingly less. This way there could at least be tomorrow.

"But what about your visa as a Mexican. Can you get it soon enough?"

"Who say I am the Mexican? Through the husband, yes. That is all."

"Then the Russian visa or the Ukranian visa or whatever you are."

She laughed, a funny little gurgling laugh. "Already I have the passport. There is no need for visas. I am the American."

"American?"

She turned to me, smiling sweetly. "You think all the ballerinas come from Russia? I am born from the Queens."

CHAPTER XVIII

JUST for a moment I looked at Vera blankly. The Cossack cap. The Scheherezade effect. The Lynn Fontanne accent. All that corny glamour. I should have known it was straight off the cob.

Suddenly I loved her for it.

She was still smiling. Then, in a murderous Russian imitation of a Brooklyn accent, she started to sing:

> East side, west side,
> All around the town. . . .

I said: "Why did you import the accent? Dog?"

"Import? Accent? The way I speak? Is true."

"Yes?"

"My mother, she is dancer too. When I am born, she is in New York. When I am four, we go to Buenos Aires." She glanced at me dubiously. "You no like it, the accent? It bore you?"

"It's terrific."

"I try," she said meekly. "All the time to be better I try. Is hard. When all the time I speak with Spanish."

We had reached the heart of the city. We passed a carnival ground festooned with colored lights. I read a street sign. Calle Merida. We were almost home.

My anger was more in control now. Lena Snood was still in my mind. She always would be. But the prospect of New Orleans had steadied me. Maybe, after all, there would be an end. At least I should learn something from Mr. Brand.

But I wasn't in New Orleans yet. There was still Mexico. I still had to settle the score with Halliday.

There are telephone booths in the Hotel Reforma. Vera went in, put in her anonymous call to the police and hurried out. We drove to my apartment. I went into the kitchen to make drinks. We needed them. There was some cooked ham and goat cheese and bread. I made sandwiches, for we hadn't eaten all day.

When I brought them into the living room Vera was combing her hair out at the mirror above the mantel. It was strange how many times my idea of her changed in so few hours.

First she had been the bird-brained glamour girl out for a thrill. Then she had been the devious, scheming siren. Now it was perfectly natural having her there in my apartment, frowning into a mirror with a bobby pin in her mouth. In less than a day, she had become an accepted part of my life as if she had always been in it.

We sat together on the couch, eating the sandwiches and drinking our drinks. We hardly talked, but her presence relaxed me. I'd never known a girl who could look so exotic and be so comfortable.

When I finished my drink, I told her she'd better call up the airport and make her reservation for the morning plane. While she was trying to get through, I left the room and slipped out of the apartment. I didn't want her to know I was going to Halliday. She was stubborn enough to insist on coming with me, and this time I didn't want a woman along.

Calle Dinamarca was only a few blocks away. I walked to the Plaza Washington. All the stores had their

iron shutters down for the night. I turned into Dinamarca and soon I was outside the Halliday's apartment building.

I glanced up the façade to the windows of Apartment Three. A light was shining behind the half-drawn zebra drapes.

He was there. Perhaps Junior was there too. I didn't care. I almost hoped he was.

I WASN'T going to warn them of my arrival. I pressed the buzzer for Apartment Number One on the ground floor. When the door was released from the catch, I slipped through the modernistic hall and around the curve of the staircase before the occupant of the apartment had a chance to see me.

I reached the landing. I moved down it to the door marked Three. I took out the Colt and aimed it level with the keyhole. In most modern Mexican apartment buildings, the walls are as thin as plyboard. I waited a moment, listening for the sound of voices inside. I heard nothing.

I pressed the buzzer.

Footsteps came shuffling toward the door. I watched the handle turn. I kept the gun pointed. The door opened. A Mexican I had never seen before stood on the threshold. He was middle-aged and plump. He was wearing bedroom slippers and a fancy blue silk bathrobe.

"Yes?" he inquired in English.. Then he saw the gun and his eyes popped.

"Put up your hands and back in," I said.

His double chin started to wobble. He threw his hands over his head and backed gingerly into the apartment.

"What I do?" he babbled. "Please. Is my right. I have the deeds. Please."

I followed him in and kicked the door shut behind me. The familiar yellow furniture gleamed opulently. The vase of carnations still stood on the coffee table. Suitcases were lying all over the place. Some of them were open. Clothes, pieces of bric-a-brac, screwed up pieces of newspaper were scattered on the carpet.

Halliday wasn't there.

I jerked the gun at the man in the bathrobe. "In the bedroom."

Sweat streamed down his face. His mouth was still open but he seemed to have lost the power of speech. Clumsily he started to back through the suitcases. He reached the bedroom door and pushed it inward. I came after him. From the room behind him rose a shrill female scream.

I entered the bedroom. In the bed where I'd slept the night before, a plump woman was propped against the pillows. She had been reading a magazine. It was slumped over her knee. She was peering at me around the man's bulk, her face creased with terror.

There were two trunks and more suitcases in here. Clothes were piled neatly on the other bed. The closets were open.

"What you want?" Words suddenly flooded out of the man. "Is the money? I give the money. Please. All we have I give. But no hurt the wife. Please not the wife."

Still aiming the gun at him, I moved to the bathroom, kicked the door in and glanced inside. It was empty.

The woman was whimpering. She was wearing a sort of pink bedcap. It had fallen askew over one eye. She began jabbering in Spanish to the man. He answered her, presumably trying to comfort her.

I began to feel stupid.

"Okay." I nodded to the living room. "Get in there."

Still chattering to the woman, the man scurried back into the living room. I followed. I looked into the kitchen. It was empty, too. I sat down on the arm of one of the chairs and said:

"When will Halliday be back?"

The man blinked. "Halliday?"

"I want Halliday. I—"

"Oh." A smile of wild hope spread over his face. "It is the other tenant.

The American who leaves this morning?"

THE suitcases, the woman in the bedroom . . . it was all becoming embarrassingly plain.

"He leaves," the man was saying. "I no know the name. But this man this morning he leave. For months we search for the furnished apartment, the wife and I. At last we got it. I pay hundred pesos to the *portero*. Right away this afternoon we move in. And now—"

There wasn't any point in going on with it. I knew when I was licked. I should have realized this place was no use to Halliday once I'd seen it. I didn't even wonder whether the man in the blue bathrobe was lying. He wasn't lying. Innocent householder was written all over the quivering chins.

I put the revolver in my pocket. He couldn't believe it. The hands were still up in the air.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Apologize to your wife."

He opened his mouth, but again no words came.

"Guess you don't know where he went?"

He shook his head.

I grinned. "Look at it this way. Now you've got something to talk to your friends about."

As I left, he was calling incredulously: *"Mama, mama, esta bien. El loco Americano se fue."* I heard heavy footsteps thumping into the bedroom.

I ran down the stairs. I didn't think he would call the police, but I was taking no chances. I slipped out into the street. A bleak feeling of helplessness caught up with me. Somewhere in this dark, sprawling city were Halliday and his pretty little henchmen.

Somewhere. Where? In eight more hours, I'd be gone. There wasn't a chance in a million I'd ever find Halliday now, unless he came after me again.

Since last night, the wheel had spun full circle. I walked home hoping I'd see the light blue sedan parked outside my house.

But it wasn't there.

Tormenting images of Lena Snood came again. Was she still lying out there in the darkness on that godforsaken mound or had the police arrived? I'd abandoned her for a chance to get Halliday.

And this had happened.

I tried to raise my spirits by thinking of New Orleans. But in my gloomy mood, even that hope seemed fairly futile. I could go to search for Deborah's uncle. But what could I offer him? The only important thing, the book, was gone. All I had to bring was the news of his niece's death.

And to warn him of Halliday.

As I started up the stairs, my thoughts shifted to Vera, and I felt better. At least something had come out of the holocaust. There was Vera.

I reached the door of my apartment and felt for my key. As I brought it out, I became conscious of a voice inside. My nerves alerted to danger. Had I been fooled again? Had Halliday or Junior seen me go out and slipped up to get Vera? I pulled the gun out of my pocket. I leaned closer to the door.

It was Vera talking. I recognized the quality of her voice but I could not hear the words.

Cautiously I slid the key into the lock. I turned it. I inched the handle round and silently opened the door a crack.

VERA'S voice sounded clearly. My first feeling was relief. She was talking on the phone. I don't know how, but you can always tell when someone's talking on the phone.

But the relief vanished almost before it had come. A sort of stunned shock took its place. Because I heard her say:

"He doesn't tell, but I think he go to your apartment in Dinamarca."

She laughed a little gurgling laugh.

"Oh, he is mad, mad with you for killing the Snood. But do not worry.

All is okay. At last he trust me. He's going to New Orleans and he is taking me with him."

There was a pause. She was listening to what Halliday was saying at the other end of the wire. My pulses were thumping. It was all I could do to keep myself from rushing into the apartment and catching her red-handed.

"Okay. Then is everything fixed. Good-by—Mr. Halliday."

She employed the name with ironic gravity and giggled.

The receiver clicked back on the stand.

CHAPTER XIX

IN a day of violent plot and counterplot, this was the worst moment. To know that Vera had completely deceived me was to know that almost everything was gone. I had trusted her, liked her. Perhaps I had almost fallen for her. That mattered. But it mattered far more that she knew Mr. Brand's address in New Orleans. Once I had lost the detective story, the address had been my only jump on Halliday.

By telling Vera, I had told him.

A great deal depended on how I handled the next few minutes. I stood in front of the quarter-opened door, thinking. There was one thing to do, of course. I realized that. The only advantage left to me lay in the fact that Vera didn't know I had discovered she was Halliday's associate. If I lost that advantage, I had nothing.

It would be difficult to go on exactly as before when I could gladly have taken her by her smooth white neck and throttled her.

But it had to be done.

I tiptoed back from the door to the head of the stairs. There must be no chance of her suspecting I had overheard the call. I waited in the dimly lit passage until my watch told me three minutes had elapsed. Then I walked back to the apartment, scraped my key in the lock and went into the little hall.

Her voice came from the living room.

"Peter, is you?"

"Is me."

I entered the living room. She was sitting on the couch, smoking a cigarette, cool as a rum Collins. She got up when she saw me. Her face was anxious—pretending to be anxious.

"Where you go? I am so afraid. Where you go without telling?"

Anger was still boiling inside me, but I found I could seem perfectly calm. It was going to be easier than I thought.

"I've been to see Halliday."

"Halliday? All that danger? You go alone?"

"He wasn't there."

"Is out?"

"Skipped. A new tenant's moved in already."

Her mouth dropped in a smile of sympathetic understanding.

"Poor Peter. You are so mad. You want to fight with him, to make avenge for Lena Snood? You feel bad, no?"

"Sure I feel bad."

"Don't worry. Is better to keep from the danger now that we go to New Orleans, no?"

"I guess so. Got your plane reservations?"

"I am off the phone one moment before you come. The first time I no get through. Was busy, busy. But everything is okay. I change for you, too. I tell them you make the stop in New Orleans."

She was that cagey. Because there had been a millionth chance I might have heard her talking on the phone, she was giving an explanation that would satisfy me.

"Fine," I said. "How about a drink?"

She shook her head. "Better I go. Is late. So early in the morning we leave. All my things I have to pack."

She knew where Halliday was. Probably she had a date with him. That was why she was going. I thought of following her. But how? She had the station-wagon. At this hour taxis were scarce in a residential district like Calle Londres. By the time I'd let her out of sight and found a cab, I wouldn't have a prayer of catching up with her again.

THEN what? Try to keep her here all night? I considered calling her amorous bluff, but I knew it wouldn't work. Obviously since she was going to New Orleans, she had to pack. I hadn't packed either. If I offered to go with her and spend the night at her house without having packed, she would know I suspected her.

I would have to let her leave. That was all there was to it. I wondered what she was going to cook up with Halliday. Would they try to prevent my going to New Orleans? I didn't think so, because on the phone Vera had spoken as if, for some reason, it suited their plans for me to make the trip.

She was presumably accompanying me as a jailer. Almost certainly Halliday would be in New Orleans, too. If there was a night plane that night, he would probably take it.

Going to New Orleans was not escaping from danger; it was heading straight into it again.

"Sure you won't have a nightcap?" I asked.

"No, really. I go." The great eyes watched me solemnly. "Tonight when I leave, you miss me?"

"You know I will."

"So good I have been today, no?"

"Nonpareil."

She pursed up her lips. "What is it, this nonpareil?"

That what-is-it gag had been the most charming thing about her. Now I realized it had just been part of the act, too.

"Perfect," I explained, playing it straight.

"Oh, Peter, I am so happy. Is fool to be happy because the married man miss me a little, I know. But is true."

She threw her arms around me and slid her lips onto mine. They were warm, convincing. The full panorama of her deceit stretched before me—the lovemaking, the clever gradual winning of confidence, the sly prodding questions tricking information out of me all the time.

I wanted to swing her around and kick her in the pants. I kissed her again, letting my mouth move from her lips to her cheek and up toward her eye.

She gave her warm little giggle—the giggle she had given over the phone to Halliday. She twisted out of my arms.

"No, Peter. I must go."

She took my hand and drew me toward the door. When she reached it she said casually as if it had just come to her:

"Oh, the gun. I take it back, yes?"

That was the first time she had been obvious.

I smiled. "No. I'll keep the gun."

She must have realized her mistake because she agreed with me instantly.

"Yes, yes, is much better, of course. Well"—her hand came up to caress my ear—"good night, Peter. We meet at the airport at six-thirty tomorrow."

"Good night, Vera."

"And do not worry. Do not think morbid of Lena. You promise?"

"I promise."

She left. I closed the door behind her. There was a safety chain. I had never used it before. I slipped it into place.

I hurried to the window. Soon she emerged from the front door, jumped into the station wagon and drove away.

I went into the kitchen for a drink. Now that I was alone, anger flamed up again. My hand was shaking as I poured the rum. I took the glass into the living room. I still had to pack. There wasn't much—just what I had had in Yucatan, and one large suit-

case. I had sent most of the stuff with Iris.

I DROPPED onto the couch and took stock of my predicament. Until this latest thing had happenend, my planned visit to Mr. Brand had been nothing much more than a formality. It was excruciatingly important now. I would have to reach him and somehow warn him before Halliday showed up.

Slowly, as the drink warmed me, I began to see that Vera might still be an asset. She was taking me to New Orleans as her prisoner. But I could use her, too, as a hostage. The whole thing had turned into a fantastic cat-and-mouse game.

It was my job to make Vera the mouse.

I packed my clothes and shaved so I would have more time in the morning. When I had finished, I cleaned out the contents of the bathroom closet and dumped it all in my Yucatan gabardine bag. The house agent had a set of keys for the apartment. There was no need to take mine to the *portero*. I put them in an envelope and dropped them on the hall table.

It wasn't late, only eleven o'clock. But I had to be up early. It was better to get some rest. I undressed, set the clock for five-fifteen and climbed into bed. The other bed where my wife used to sleep looked bleak and cold. Iris and New York seemed very far away.

"Don't think morbid of Lena."

That's what Vera had said. That was the last thing she had said before she went off to meet Lena's murderer.

I stubbed my cigarette in an ashtray. I would like to have been stubbing it in Vera's face.

I turned off the light, but I didn't feel sleepy. As I lay in the darkness, my mind clicked around and around like a cogwheel. Vera owned that huge house. She was rich, a person with position. Halliday could have got himself any amount of Juniors. Juniors come a dime a dozen in Mexico. But how had he managed to hire Vera? Perhaps she wasn't hired. Perhaps she was a full-fledged partner.

But whatever she was, her role was clear to me now. Halliday had used two methods against me, running them both at once—the direct method and the indirect method. Junior was the direct method. Vera was the indirect, the simple ancient method of Delilah.

She had been part of the direct method, too. She had been assigned to pick me up in the cemetery and drive me to Los Remedios where Junior could get me. When the theft of my clothes had brought them nothing, she had been commissioned to maneuver me into a dark street where Junior could kidnap me in the light blue sedan.

Sometimes, trying to win my confidence, must have given her bad moments. Her quick response to my telephone call, for example had destroyed my last suspicions of her, but it had almost ruined their plan for abducting Lena at Xochimilco.

Only almost, of course. From the beginning their teamwork had been perfect. Certainly they had got everything they wanted out of me.

Or had they?

I started to wonder just why they had lured me to Cuicuilco that evening. I knew now why they had made Lena Snood ask for Vera, too. They had seemed to threaten Vera simply to strengthen my confidence in her. But why had they wanted me?

I was almost sure that they had never believed I was just a tourist who had blundered into their mayhem by accident. That was too simple an explanation for minds as devious as theirs.

TO them, I was still the associate of Deborah Brand, and was masquerading as a sucker. And, as such, it was possible that they thought I had known Brand's address all along and that, once they captured me, they could wring it out of me.

But was that all they had wanted? Just Brand's address? When Halliday killed Deborah and stole her pocketbook, he must have found her plane ticket to New Orleans inside it. If that were so, he had always known her true destination. Wasn't it improbable that their elaborate kidnap attempt had been staged simply to get Mr. Brand's street number, which might well have been in the New Orleans telephone book?

It seemed to me then that a detective story with some kind of message in it and an address weren't much to justify a conspiracy as tremendous as this one seemed to be. Wasn't it more likely that there was still something else they lacked, something they thought I had, something from Deborah, something, perhaps, which was the most important thing of all?

I played ineffectually with this new idea until my thought processes started to blur and I slept.

My dreams were bad. They were haunted by women — Vera Garcia, Lena Snood, Deborah Brand. Deborah was a ghost. Lena was a corpse.

Vera was an Aztec feathered serpent with a beautiful woman's face.

CHAPTER XX

THE shrill bell of the alarm clock awoke me to darkness. I got up and dressed, putting the Colt in my pocket. There was orange juice in the ice-box. I made coffee. After I had breakfasted, I picked up my suitcase and my brown gabardine bag and went down to the street.

Dawn had come, and a thin gray light was bringing the city back into day. The street was deserted. I walked the few blocks to the Paseo and caught a taxi almost immediately outside the Hotel Reforma.

It got me to the airport before six-thirty, too early to check my bags. Vera had not arrived. I had my ticket changed to take in my stop-over and optimistically took a reservation on a plane to New York leaving New Orleans at 10 p.m. that night. I inquired if a plane had left for New Orleans the night before after ten. I was told that the regular evening plane had been delayed for repairs and had left at midnight. That meant, almost certainly, that Halliday was now in New Orleans.

I felt licked before I started. My chances of seeing Iris that night seemed infinitely remote. I sat down on my suitcases to wait for Vera.

A boy with bare feet and a serape came by desultorily vending copies of yesterday's *Mexican Herald,* the local English language newspaper. I bought one, glanced at the headlines and put it down on my knee.

I have never liked the atmosphere of impersonal efficiency which anything to do with airplanes seems to engender. That morning the airport was particularly depressing. Flustered passengers, hunched against the early morning cold, were as usual scurrying around, searching for bags that were not lost, calling unnecessary instructions to each other, making inquiries at the wrong desks.

An air hostess, metallically pretty and indistinguishable from any other air hostess, went by, laughing and flirting with two pilots. A white-coated attendant was half-heartedly sweeping dead cigarettes and candy papers into a dusty pile.

My speculations of the night before started to plague me again. Did they still think I could be useful to them? If not, why were they letting me go to New Orleans? Between them they could at least have tried to stop me. Had I been right? Did they still think I was in possession of something—something without which they were stymied?

The minutes seemed to drag. For want of anything better with which to divert my thoughts I began to read the *Herald.* Being yesterday's, I knew

there would be no report of the discovery of Lena's body. I read that someone had divorced someone, that something had happened in Paraguay, that Miss Leona something, the sparkling songstress direct from somewhere, was to make her sensational Mexican debut at. . . .

My eyes riveted on a small paragraph at the foot of the third page. I read:

AMERICAN ARCHEOLOGIST MISSING

Lima, Peru: Today word came from the Camp of the Brand-Liddon Archeological Expedition deep in the hinterland, that Mr. Joseph Brand, well-known Finnish-American archeologist, is missing. He disappeared from the camp last night, and although search parties have been sent out no trace as yet has been found of him. It is feared that he met with some accident in the jungle or possibly even that some of the primitive Indians in the neighborhood have captured him. Mr. Brand and Mr. Liddon have been trying to locate a hitherto undiscovered Inca city buried in the jungle. Mr. Frank Liddon, who headed the expedition with Mr. Brand, was not present at the time of the disappearance, having left for Argentina the week before.

I read the story again. It proved startlingly that Deborah had been telling the truth at least about her father's profession and whereabouts. It also opened up new and alarming vistas.

WHAT sort of opposition was I up against when Deborah's father could be kidnaped in Peru, while Halliday was killing her in Yucatan?

A voice behind me called:

"Peter."

I threw the paper down on the cement floor and turned. Vera was coming through the little clusters of passengers. A porter walked behind her with a fancy pigskin suitcase. She looked sensational in a tomato-red suit, a small black straw hat and the silver fox cape.

People stared at her. I could tell she was making them feel dowdy. They thought she was someone famous, a Mexican movie star, maybe. And she might have been. She had the celebrity touch. She'd always had it.

I wondered whether she had ever really been a ballerina or whether that story had been phony, too.

She smiled radiantly. I smiled back.

"Good morning, Peter."

"Good morning, Vera."

The porter put her bag down next to mine and went away. She was being vivacious, almost arch.

"Am punctual, no? You like me today? Am chic?"

"Where is the kitchen stove?"

"Kitchen stove?" She looked suspicious. "You mock me, no? Am too smart? Like always I junk me up?"

"On the contrary. You're elegant. Ginger-peachy."

"What is this—" She broke off and grinned. "Ginger-peachy. I know. Is elegant." She was suddenly serious. "You have the plan for what we do in New Orleans?"

I'd like to have asked: "What about your plans, baby?"

I said: "Just to see this guy Brand, I guess. What more can we do? Do you have any suggestions?"

"Me?" She nuzzled her hand through my arm. "Is you are the big brains. Me? I am just the stupid cow who obeys."

Someone blared something through the public address system, first in Spanish, then in English. It had nothing to do with us. The air hostess passed again without the pilots, patting her back hair smugly and looking as if she had eaten them for breakfast.

"Peter."

"Yes, Vera."

"Am thinking."

I jumped on my guard. That was always how she started when she was fishing for something.

"Thinking of what, Vera?"

"You think is only this book, this detective story? You think there is nothing more?"

My heart seemed to flip over like a fish on a river bank. She was asking me whether there was something more than the book. That meant my earlier suspicions were correct. She and Halliday were still missing something from Deborah Brand. Of course,

it didn't mean that I had it. It only meant that they thought I had it.

"Like what, Vera?"

"Oh." She shrugged. "I do not know. Only it seems so little. All this fuss just for the detective story, the address."

The cleaning man swished his broom around our suitcases and moved on. A little girl, traveling with a large man, had been abandoned near a straw basket close to us and started to howl. An American woman, with a sharp nose and a mannish haircut, strode up to the airline desk.

She was obviously just back from Acapulco. Her face flamed crimson. The sharp nose was magnificently peeling. It was a sunburn to end all sunburns.

Vera giggled. "Gods, what a sight. Is the rare steak, no? The sunburn—"

I DIDN'T hear the end of the sentence. Sunburn. The word seemed to shoot up in my mind like a rocket. Something Deborah Brand had given me! She had come to my room in Chichen-Itza with the jar of sunburn cream. After she had rubbed my back, she had left the jar on by bedside table.

Her jar of sunburn cream!

Earlier, in the car, it had been Deborah who had brought up the subject of my sunburn. It had been she who had suggested lending me the cream. I thought of the first thing that had made me suspect she was something more than a tourist — her nervous glance over her shoulder at her bag.

Had her fear been for the jar of sunburn cream? Had the really important thing always been hidden in it? Had she seized on my sunburn as a plausible excuse for smuggling the jar into my possession where it would have been safe, whatever might have happened later in her own room?

My original fantastic ideas came back. A jewel. A jewel could be buried in a jar of cream.

I had never thought of the jar from the moment Deborah had put it on the bedside table until now. But presumably when I left Chichen Itzá I had packed it with the rest of the things. Presumably it had been in my bathroom closet ever since I had come back to Mexico City. Presumably, too, since last night I had cleared everything out of the closet, I had packed it again in my gabardine bag.

When my apartment had been ransacked, the bathroom had not been touched. Perhaps Halliday's man had not bothered to search it, or perhaps he had been scared away by something before he had finished the job. That didn't matter. All that mattered was that they obviously had not found it, or Vera would not be questioning me about that "something more."

I tried desperately to reconstruct the moment last night when I had packed my toilet things. I couldn't remember whether I had seen the jar or not.

But it must have been there and I must have taken it.

It must be lying in the gabardine bag which was standing on the ground now, between Vera's feet and my own.

The gabardine bag which didn't even lock.

Those thoughts tumbled through my mind in a couple of seconds. I was still looking at the woman with the peeling nose. I turned to Vera and saw that she was watching her, too.

She was absorbed. She didn't realize I was looking at her. There was a strange, speculative gleam in her eyes and suddenly the gleam changed to an expression of controlled excitement.

It vanished as quickly as it had come. But it had given away her thoughts as plainly as if she had spoken them out loud.

I had told her of the sunburn episode in Yucatan. She had been watching the woman and her mind had taken the same leap as mine.

She had realized about the jar of sunburn cream, too.

I felt like a piece of elastic twisted to its extreme endurance. I had planned to make some excuse and duck off to in-

spect the suitcase in the men's room. I couldn't do that now. Anything I did which had any connection with the baggage would give away to Vera the fact that I had realized the importance of the sunburn cream.

I was horribly conscious of the gabardine bag at my feet. It seemed as if everyone in the crowded airport was looking at it.

VERA was playing super-nonchalant. That was her way of covering up. She felt in her pocketbook and brought out a package of cigarettes and an album of book matches. She put a cigarette in her mouth, struck a match, then gave a little cry. For the match had ignited all the rest, and for a second the whole book blazed in her hand.

"Damn!" She threw the book to the ground and stamped it out.

I saw what her game was. I saw it as clearly as if I had thought it up myself. I felt a kind of panic.

She spun to me, holding out a smoke-blackened finger. Her eyes were flashing with the Pseudo-Russian anger.

"How am I such a fool? Peter, please, it burns, burns. Haven't you something in the bag? Something to soothe?"

"Wait," I said. "There's a drug counter over there I'll get some Unguentine."

"No, is not open yet, too early. Peter, in your bathroom I notice. I am sure you have the stuff against the sun. The sunburn cream. Is in your bag, yes?"

I could have said no. I could have said I'd left all the drugs in the apartment. That would have meant the end of Vera in my life. Heaven alone knew how she would have wangled it, but she could never have afforded to go on the plane and leave the jar behind.

In the few seconds I had for a decision, I played with that idea, tempted by the thought of the mental anguish it would cause her. But I abandoned it, because I knew that I would have Halliday to face in New Orleans. It was better to keep Vera with me, even at the expense of letting her see the sunburn cream.

Better to keep my hostage.

"Peter!" she shrilled. "Please. It hurts. Look in the bag. Please."

I squatted down and unzippered the gabardine bag. I groped through shirts, feeling the thin handle of my razor, the stiff bristles of my brush.

Was it there or wasn't it? If it wasn't, both Vera and I had lost. If it was, even though the danger was terrific, I still had a chance for victory.

My fingers touched something smooth and round. I pulled it out.

The jar of sunburn cream was there all right. It was in my hand.

CHAPTER XXI

UNTIL now I had never really looked at it. It was the size of a large jar of cold cream. It was an American brand, but the label was printed in Spanish.

It was heavy. I noticed that with a stab of excitement. Heavier than you might expect a jar of cream to be.

"Quick, Peter," cried Vera querulously. "Give it to me."

I glanced at her. In spite of myself, I admired her. Her whole desperate plot would succeed if that jar passed from my hand to hers, but I could never have told it from her face. Her expression was exactly right, a little anxious, a little piqued at her own stupidity and my delay.

"I'll do it," I said. "I'm quite a first-aid man. Hold out your hand."

She stretched her hand out. The burn was localized on one finger. I unscrewed the cap of the jar. It must have been full when Deborah used it on my back, for only a little had been scooped out. It was excruciating to know that the solution was almost certainly there in my hand and I could do nothing about it.

I smeared cream on her finger. Her hand was trembling. Still holding the jar, I searched through the bag again and found a band-aid. I applied it neatly over the burn.

"There. Good as new."

I screwed the cap on the jar. Vera laughed. "What a fool I am. So clumsy. Peter, give me the cream. I keep in my bag, no?"

I had been expecting that. "I wouldn't bother. This stuff's only good for sunburn. That'll hold you till Brownsville. Then we'll buy some Unguentine."

I knew she couldn't argue against that. She wouldn't dare make an issue of it and risk arousing my suspicions.

A voice brayed Spanish over the public address system. Then it said: "Passengers for Flight Number Five-sixty-four to Brownsville, New Orleans and New York, please check your baggage at the airline desk.

Once again I had to make a split-second decision. Should I keep the jar with me or put it back in the bag? It was too big for my pocket. If I kept it, Vera would offer to put it in her pocketbook. I couldn't reasonably refuse so sensible a suggestion. It was better to leave it in the bag. The bag would be checked through and I would have the check.

I dropped the jar back into the gabardine bag and zippered it. I tucked it under my arm and picked up Vera's suitcase in one hand and mine in the other.

"Come on."

After they had weighed us in, they tagged the bags and gave me the three checks. The check for her suitcase was only one number different from that of the gabardine bag. If she had it, I was afraid she might try to pull a switch in New Orleans. I kept all three checks. I knew she couldn't object. It is natural for a man traveling with a girl to handle the baggage.

When you're leaving a country, the the customs is a mere formality. While the official searched cursorily, I hovered around the gabardine bag. Soon I watched a porter carrying the three pieces off to the plane.

Until we reached Brownsville, the sunburn cream was as safe as if it were in a bank vault.

I bought a stack of magazines, chiefly for an excuse not to have to be chattering with Vera on the plane. But she was even more eager to pretend to read than I. As the plane took off, we climbed and swerved away from the great sprawling city of Mexico, she assumed an intense interest in a magazine that told you how to make your home much more beautiful than anyone else's for forty dollars a week.

SHE hardly brought her nose out of it until we started to bank over the Border town of Brownsville.

It was being worse for her than for me. That realization brought me some grim kind of satisfaction. At least I had control of the jar. For her it was like a carrot tied just above a donkey's nose.

She had plenty of time for evolving a plan to outsmart me at Brownsville. I was doubly on my guard. But she attempted nothing. The bags came through customs, were weighed in again by Eastern Airlines, retagged and carried away to the plane which was to take us to New Orleans. I had the three new checks in my wallet.

So far I was winning. It wasn't much of a victory, of course. The real danger would begin with Halliday in New Orleans.

Before the plane started, I bought some Unguentine and band-aid and dressed Vera's finger again. Once we were in the air, she lost herself in another magazine. Every now and then I chatted with her to seem natural, but most of the time I spent thinking about New Orleans.

If I went straight to Mr. Brand, Vera would want to go with me and, since she was still officially my ally, I couldn't stop her. It would be better to get hotel rooms, first. Perhaps, in the hotel, I could work something.

As the plane droned over the monotony of Texas, a plan slowly materialized. But the plan covered only Vera. It did not provide for the safe-keeping of the jar. For all I knew, Halliday had killed Mr. Brand the way he had killed Deborah. If I took the jar to 1428

Dauphine Street, I might be delivering it straight into the enemy's hands.

I got increasingly jittery trying to think. By the time we had flown over the desolate bayous of Louisiana and dived to the airport I had still decided nothing. Something almost like panic seized me as we walked down the gangplank.

Vera seemed suspiciously calm now that we had landed. She linked her hand through my arm and said with a brightness that rang false:

"Well, Peter, what we do first?"

"Go to a hotel, I guess. We're going to need a base of operations."

"Yes, yes. The St. Charles, yes?"

She'd said that too quickly. The St. Charles Hotel was probably where she had told Halliday we would go.

"Let's make it the Montedoro," I said. "I always go there."

"But the St. Charles is—"

Her voice trailed off. Once again she was scared of pressing a point. Her fear of making me suspicious was keeping her hands tied. I was still winning.

I had been in Mexico so long that I was used to the sound of Spanish-speaking voices, to the colorful grimcrack atmosphere, the informality. It was strange to be back where there were no beggars, where no furtive dogs padded in and out searching for garbage.

We moved through the animated crowd of people who seemed phenomenally smart and prosperous. Behind a bar an American barkeep was serving American drinks. I could have done with a shot of whisky, but the bags would be coming through any minute.

With Vera still on my arm, I started toward the baggage room. Unobtrusively, I kept my eyes peeled for Halliday, although I didn't imagine he would be crude enough to let himself be visible at the airport. There was no sign of him.

BUT I was still in hopeless indecision as to what to do with the jar. It was too bulky to keep in my pocket. However careful I was, Vera might find a chance to steal it once we got to the hotel.

A colored porter came up, saying: "Bags, sir?"

"Yes." I drew my arm away from Vera's hand. "Wait here. I'll be back."

I gave the porter the checks and he started toward the baggage room. I followed. So did Vera. Quite a sizable crowd was gathered around the counter. Several other planes must recently have landed. Suitcases were being brought into the baggage room from a back door. People were calling out, pointing at their bags, causing the usual confusion.

Vera's pigskin suitcase came through and was dumped near the counter.

"There's one," I said to the porter.

He scooped it up without consulting the check. My large suitcase appeared then. I pointed it out and he got that too. A new load of baggage was trundled in. I saw the gabardine bag. It was perched on top of the pile. A baggage man swung it down. As he removed it from the heap, I saw another gabardine dag on the trolley. It was the next bag the man picked up. He tossed it down on the floor close to mine.

The bags were identical. They were made by the million. But I could recognize mine by an oil stain on the side. A memory rushed back of the switch Halliday had tried to pull in Mexico. Suddenly I knew what to do.

I scrambled through the crowd and, leaning over the barrier, picked up the gabardine bag that was not mine.

"Here." I pushed past Vera and handed it to the porter. He didn't look at the check. I had known he wouldn't because he hadn't looked at the others.

Once before I had gotten the wrong bag at an airport and I knew the official routine. The man whose bag I had taken would presumably find out the mistake and turn in my bag. While the airline was trying to locate me, the bag would automatically be shipped to the lost property office in Atlanta, Georgia.

As the porter took the suitcases off to a taxi, I felt a thrill of triumph. It was tough on the innocent traveler

whose bag I had snitched, but that was the least of my worries. Unless, by some almost inconceivable accident, he failed to turn in my bag, the jar of sunburn cream would be utterly out of Halliday's reach. And, once I was sure of my connection with Deborah's uncle, I could, by calling the airport, have the bag flown back from Atlanta in a couple of hours.

Vera had climbed into the taxi. I tipped the porter and directed the driver to the Montedoro Hotel. Ten or so minutes later when we had reached the center of town and were driving down Baronne Street, we passed the solid mass of the St. Charles Hotel. Vera glanced at it quickly and glanced away.

I wondered whether Halliday was waiting for us there in the vestibule.

We crossed Canal Street which was crawling with Main Street activity, ducked into the old French Quarter and reached the Montedoro.

A porter came out for the baggage. I asked for and got two adjoining rooms and, while we went up in the elevator with a bellhop, I ran through the plan I had concocted in the plane. I could see no reason why it should fail. We reached our rooms and I said:

"When you're through unpacking, Vera, come in for a council of war."

She smiled happily. She liked that. "Yes, Peter. Quick, I come."

THE bellhop took her into her room and then brought my bags into mine. I paid him off and closed the dor. There were telephones in the rooms. I knew Vera was going to call Halliday. There was no way I could stop her, but I didn't particularly care whether she did or not. We had made no definite arrangements.

There was nothing she could tell him except the bare fact of our arrival and our whereabouts. I didn't think Halliday would try anything as dangerous as a kidnap attempt from the hotel. She would tell him about the sunburn cream, of course. And he would tell her it was her job to get it.

Unless I was very wrong, Halliday would be out of the picture for a while. Vera would be on her own.

The bedroom was just an ordinary hotel bedroom with a bathroom in one corner. I crossed to see if the bathroom door had a key. It did. These weren't Mexican walls. I knew I had no chance of listening in on Vera's call. I opened my large suitcase and started to unpack.

As I expected, in a few minutes, there was a knock on the door. I opened it and Vera came in without the hat and the silver foxes. She was still wearing the red suit. She had combed her hair and redone her face. She looked magnificent —Hollywood's idea of a ballerina in technicolor. I wondered why she didn't go to the Coast and make a sensation in the movies instead of running around with murderers.

I picked up a bunch of ties and started to take them to the closet.

She said: "Already I unpack. Am quick, quick. I help you, no?"

I had expected that too. Orders from Halliday must already have come through. I nodded to the gabardine bag.

"How about working on that? Better take it in the bathroom, though. It's mostly toilet stuff."

She made a dive for the bag. I was getting to know her so well I could read her thoughts.

"The sucker," she was thinking in her devious Russian mind, "at last he hand me the sunburn cream on the silver samovar."

She carried the bag into the bathroom. I strolled after her with the ties on my arm. As she stooped to open the bag, I took her elbow and drew her gently around.

"Know something, Vera?"

The black wool eyelashes batted seductively, but she could only just control her impatience.

"What, Peter?"

"You're something a guy could go nuts over." Absurdly, although I didn't mean it, I knew that at one time it could almost have been true.

She giggled her throaty giggle. "Real-

ly, you think? You who are so to the wife tied."

"I could be untied."

I leaned toward her. She tilted her face upward. Her hands came up to my shoulders.

"Peter—"

Her lips were almost on mine. They seemed grotesquely large, but perfect like the red curved lips of a pin-up girl on a poster.

I slapped my hand over her mouth. She gave a muffled scream and started to struggle. I stuffed my handkerchief between her teeth. She almost bit me. I tucked her head under my arm and went to work tying her hands behind her back with a necktie.

It is easy enough to subdue a woman, even one that kicks like a mule. In a couple of minutes I had her ankles tied too. I made a proper gag for her mouth. She could breathe, but that was about all.

"Upsy daisy."

I picked her up, swung round and dumped her in the bathtub. At the best of times, it's hard to get out of a slippery tub.

She glared at me, her eyes blazing with indignation and shock. I grinned.

"What is it, this tying and gagging?" I asked. "I know, is the old one, two."

I waved to her friendlily. I picked up the false gabardine bag. I might need it. I went out of the bathroom and locked it behind me.

Operation Vera had been successful. Now for the far more dangerous Operation Brand.

CHAPTER XXII

QUITE neatly I had disposed of Vera. But I hadn't disposed of Halliday and he was much the greater menace. Almost certainly he had been six or seven hours in New Orleans. That was time enough for him to have done to Mr. Brand what he had done to Deborah and Lena—and what his friends had probably done to Deborah's father.

My little success, however, had made me optimistic. And the Colt in my pocket helped my confidence. I had to have a break some time. Perhaps this was the moment for it. Perhaps I would find Mr. Brand safely ensconced at 1428 Dauphine Street.

I left the room, locked it behind me, and turned the key in at the desk downstairs. I had brought the false gabardine bag with me because, if I did succeed in making contact with Mr. Brand, I would have to turn it in at the Airline office before I could retrieve my own.

The hotel lobby was crowded with cheerful, touristy-looking people. As I moved to the swing door, I saw a group of telephone booths. It seemed unlikely in this perverse tangle where nothing came easy that Mr. Brand should be listed in the telephone book, but I went over to the directory. I leafed through it to the Bs and, mildly incredulous, saw the name:

Brand, William C.—1428B Dauphine Street.

My feeling of near-success sky-rocketed. This was an omen. Obviously it was both wiser and safer to telephone to Mr. Brand before going to an apartment which might, by now, be a trap. I went into a booth and dialed the number from the book. Almost at once a man's deep gruff voice answered, a voice which certainly did not belong to Bill Halliday.

I said: "Mr. Brand?"

The voice said: "Yes. This is he."

This was being almost too easy. I said: "I'm Peter Duluth. You don't know me, but I'm a friend of Deborah's."

"Deborah!" Mr. Brand's voice was quiet, but I could trace suppressed excitement behind it.

"I've got something rather important for you, something from Deborah. Can I come round right away?"

"Of course, Mr. Duluth."

It sounded melodramatic but I felt it wiser to add: "You may not know it, but there are people who might cause trouble. I'll ring three times. Don't let

anyone else in until I come."

I had expected surprise but Mr. Brand's voice was even as ever. "Yes, Mr. Duluth, I am fully conscious of the danger. Three times?"

"Three times."

I rang off. My hand was unsteady with excitement. Here was my break at last. This wasn't going to end in a gun battle with "sluggings and chasings and strippings." It was going to end quietly in a peaceable apartment in an American city. I might even catch my night plane and keep my date in New York with Iris after all.

I left the booth and went back to the telephone book to write down Mr. Brand's number against any future need. As I scribbled it on a piece of paper, I saw that he was listed a second time. Beneath his home address, was printed:

Brand, William C., Mining Engineer.

An address on Dock Street was given.

So Deborah's uncle was a mining engineer. I played with the implications of this information as I moved out of the hotel into the pale late afternoon sunshine.

MY watch showed four-thirty. I glanced up and down to make sure that Halliday wasn't anywhere around. There was no sign of him. I started to walk, noticing the passers-by and convincing myself that I wasn't being followed.

I would have been, of course, if Vera had been able to warn Halliday that I was going out. The thought of Vera trussed up in the bathroom added to my sensation of satisfaction.

I had been in New Orleans several times before, and knew it well enough. The Vieux Carre is pretty small. I was on Royale now. Dauphine Street, I remembered, ran parallel to it a couple of blocks over.

After Mexico, New Orleans' much boasted French Quarter seemed rather phony. The old houses with their delicate iron filigree balconies had charm, but they were all faked up. "Ye olde Antique Shoppe," with little leaded glass panes. "Mother Whoit's Chicken Kitchen." "The Only Original Absinthe Parlor." America can't leave a good thing alone.

As I passed a wildly antique drug store that looked like something out of a Shubert Brother's production of "Naughty Marietta," I started seriously to think of Mr. Brand as a mining engineer. New ideas began to flutter in my mind like pigeons around a dovecot. South America is staggeringly rich in minerals. Deborah's father was an archeologist. Archeologists dug things up.

Was the solution of this involved mystery somehow tied up with a mine?

I had reached Dauphine. It was another of the picturesque streets. A woman in an artist's smock was being Bohemian and sitting in front of an easel on the sidewalk painting Gay Old New Orleans.

My thought pigeons were still fluttering. What if Mr. Brand in his archeological pursuits had stumbled on some mineral deposit, some vein which might have great value but whose authenticity wasn't certain until checked by regular mining engineers?

He could have sent Deborah to contact his brother, sent her secretly because there were other people with their eyes on the mine too. And the other people could have been trying to stop her before she got to William C. Brand. Something like a mine which could make a fortune for anyone who got hold of it would have been a real incentive to wholesale murder and abduction.

Until then I had never evolved even the crudest theory of what lay behind all that had happened to me. Had it been that? The Brand brothers and Deborah against Halliday and Vera Garcia.

The numbers on Dauphine Street started at Canal Street. I was in the two hundred block. I turned into Dauphine past the woman in the smock and headed downtown.

The detective story could have contained some vital information about the mine in code. And the jar? What could be in the jar? A sample, perhaps, of the ore?

At last the violence and terror of the past few days came out of the fantastic realm of jewels and Inca relica into a world of brutal commercial danger. But who were Mr. Brand's rivals? It must be a sizable organization to be able to abduct Deborah's father in Peru, send Halliday after Deborah to Yucatan, and employ Vera as an agent in Mexico City.

Agent. The word opened up even wider vistas. Was some government behind it all? In this age dedicated to self-destruction, miniature unofficial wars for the control of minerals must be going on all over the world.

Had I all this time been blundering around in a war?

I REACHED the fourteen block. The Vieux Carré was getting a little tired but it was still bravely quaint. No one had followed me. I was sure of that. And no one was loitering in front of 1428.

It was an old house which had been renovated as an apartment building. The iron balconies had been painted red and were decorated with vines and geraniums in pots. The ground floor was occupied by an Art Book Store with engravings of clipper ships and books like "The Romance of Louisiana" in its window.

At one side of the store was an entrance which led to the actual apartments. A sign classified it as 1428-B. I went into the doorway. Names were printed on cards by the buzzers. Beside the buzzer for Apartment 4 was a card saying:

William C. Brand

Feeling absurdly elated, I pressed the buzzer three times. Almost immediately the button above released the door catch. I moved into a small hall, painted primrose yellow, and started up the stairs.

After three flights, I came to the top floor. Brand apparently owned it all. His card was attached to the only door.

The simplicity of it all seemed almost an anticlimax.

I knocked on the door. It opened. A large man with red hair and very blue eyes stood smiling awkwardly at me on the threshold. He held out his hand.

"Well, Mr. Duluth, I've made a thorough mess of the whole thing, but it's good to see you at last."

I had anticipated danger and Halliday. I had anticipated uneventfulness and Mr. Brand. But I had never expected surprise.

And that is what I felt—sheer, undiluted surprise.

Because the man in front of me was Mr. Johnson, the bridegroom from Yucatan.

His smile, although apologetic, had its old familiar sweetness.

"I'm certainly relieved to see you. If I'd had any sense, this could have happened days ago. Come in."

I hesitated on the threshold. In this affair where everything sooner or later became something that it hadn't been, it was reasonable enough that even the Yucatan bridegroom should fit into the pattern. But it seemed almost beyond belief that he of all people could be the uncle to whom Deborah had been so perilously fleeing.

He obviously read my thoughts. "I can see you don't trust me. I suppose it must seem crazy that I'm Deborah's uncle." He jerked his head toward the apartment behind him. "You probably think I've got some sort of trap here for you. Why don't we go out and get this thing straightened out in a bar or a cafe?"

His frankness, of course, could have been an act, but I didn't think so. Besides, I had my gun. I said: "It's all right here."

"Good." He turned and lumbered with his heavy athlete's grace through a little hallway into a long, untidy room. I followed. A large desk, strewn with papers and little bottles, presumably containing metals or ores, stood by the window. A half-open door gave a glimpse into a room beyond.

"My workshop," he said. "All the serious stuff's done at the office. But I play around a bit here. I have a house out in the suburbs where my wife holds sway. This is just a hole-in-the-wall—my old

bachelor hangout. Sit down."

He indicated a worn blue leather chair. I sat down and put the gabardine bag on the carpet at my feet. He moved around the desk and took the chair behind it.

"Of course, Mr. Duluth, looking back I can see now exactly what poor Deborah must have done. But at the time I hadn't the faintest idea that you were anything more than an innocent tourist." He glanced at me almost suspiciously. "You do know what I'm talking about?"

"That Deborah was murdered," I said, "for something she'd been bringing from Peru?"

He looked relieved. "Exactly."

"Something to do with a mine, wasn't it?"

He put his big hands on the surface of the desk and studied them. "I can see that Deborah confided in you."

"She didn't. I've just been picking it up as I went along—in between attempts on my life. Maybe you'd tell me the whole story. Oddly enough, by now I'm curious."

His quick smile came again. "I don't blame you." He paused. "But first, you said on the phone you were bringing me something. You are, aren't you? You have the book and the—sample."

So I had been right about the jar of sunburn cream.

"No. I haven't got the book. Halliday's got that. I haven't the sample, if that's what it is, either. But I can get it. It's perfectly safe."

He looked directly at me from his straight blue eyes. I couldn't tell whether the news that the book was in Halliday's possession was a blow or not.

"And you are prepared to give it to me if I can satisfy you of my honesty?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then I'd better tell you the story from the beginning. When you've heard it, I imagine you'll be satisfied with my honesty." His lips moved wryly. "I doubt whether you'll be satisfied with my handling of the situation. I made a mess of it, but then I am an amateur in conspiracy. I'm afraid that fact had very tragic results."

CHAPTER XXIII

BRAND offered me a cigarette from a box on the desk. I refused.

"It starts with my brother," he said. "Joseph used to be a mining engineer, too. Then he got interested in archeology and gave everything else up. For the last fifteen years he's lived down in South and Central America, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru. Three or four months ago, Joseph and another man—"

"Frank Liddon," I broke in, remembering the newspaper story. "By the way, I read about your brother's disappearance."

He looked up, gravely. "You did? Yes, Joseph and Liddon took this expedition into the interior of Peru. It's very wild country, miles from civilization. Joseph had a lead on an old Inca city. They never found it. But for quite a while they've been excavating around there. And then, about three weeks ago, I guess, Joseph, quite by chance, dug into this vein of ore. He was enough of a mineralogist to get excited because he had a hunch that it might contain something of terrific value." He watched me portentously across the desk. "He thought it might contain a high percentage of thorium."

"Thorium?" I echoed, not registering.

"You don't know what thorium is? It's a sort of second cousin to uranium, but much rarer. Its value and political implications at the present time in our would-be atomic age can hardly be measured. Right away, Joseph realized the immense potential importance of the thing and took every precaution to keep his discovery a secret. Although he'd worked with Liddon before and trusted him as an old friend, even to him, he only hinted at what he might

have found.

"Immediately, of course, he thought of me. During the war, my firm worked very closely with the United States Government. We are still cooperating. He knew, if he could get all the information to me and if his guess was right, that through me the ultimate control of the area would get into the proper hands, because through me the United States Government and the Peruvian Government could work together."

He lit a cigarette. "It might have been fairly plain sailing, but it wasn't. Because just a short time before, another archeological expedition had arrived at the scene. It was organized by a group of which, politically, Joseph had a right to be dubious and, from little incidents, he began to suspect that the news, or at least enough of it to arouse curiosity, had leaked out. He couldn't think how, but he was certain of it when a couple of days later there was a kidnap attempt made on him."

I was listening intently now. "Another one?"

"Yes. It was clumsy. It didn't come off. But it was enough to make him sure the other expedition was only a front for an intensive mining survey. And then Deborah who'd been in college in Buenos Aires showed up unexpectedly. She'd come on her vacation to visit her father. Joseph saw that it was terribly dangerous there for a girl, particularly his daughter, and decided to take care of the two problems at once.

"I don't think he told Deborah much, just enough to make her appreciate the importance of the situation. He drew a rough sketch of the exact area of the vein in the back of a pocket novel. He gave it to her. He also gave her a sample of ore and told her to come straight to me in New Orleans."

THERE it was, fairly simple, much as I had figured it out on my walk through the quaintness of the Vieux Carré.

I had been right about stumbling into a war.

"But before Deborah left," continued Mr. Brand, "a cable came in for Liddon from the nearest town to say that his brother was dying in the Argentine. He had to leave at once. It was only after both he and Deborah had gone that Joseph discovered, once again quite by accident, apparently, how the information had leaked out. He came across some paper—I don't know what it was—but it proved that Liddon, in whom he had had complete trust, had sold out to the other side. Liddon didn't know everything, of course. He didn't know the actual location of the vein or exactly what it might contain, but he knew enough. And what was worse, he'd also known of Deborah's mission to me."

He leaned across the desk. "Joseph realized that they would do everything to keep her from getting the information to me. It was too late to warn her. So he drove in to the nearest telephone, called me, and told me as much as I'm telling you. He was half-crazy with worry for Deborah. I suggested the only thing I could think of. If they were after her, they would probably try to pick her up in New Orleans. I said I'd take the next flight to Merida where she had to change planes, and escort her on from there."

He shrugged ruefully. "That's where I took over. And that's where things started going seriously wrong."

He stubbed his cigarette. "There was one bad difficulty. Deborah hadn't been in the States since she was a child and didn't know what I looked like. The only thing she knew about me was that recently I'd married a young Mexican girl. I decided, uselessly as it turned out, that I would take Lupe with me, partly to help Deborah to identify me, partly to make the whole expedition seem like an innocent vacation. I reached Merida in time. My wife and I were at the airport when Deborah's plane from Balboa was due to arrive.

"That's when the first thing went wrong. You see, I'd never seen Liddon. Didn't have an idea what he looked like. The story of his dying brother in Ar-

gentina had of course been a fake. He was the man they had decided to send after Deborah. He was there at the airport in Merida to stop her."

I saw it then. I had been suspecting it almost from the beginning of his story.

"Liddon,'" I said, "is Halliday."

William C. Brand nodded. "From there on, I can only deduce what happened, but it's pretty clear. Liddon must somehow have found out what I looked like. At any rate, he spotted me at the airport and realized that Joseph had discovered about him and got in touch with me. The moment Deborah left the plane, before I had even time to identify her, he had met her.

"Since she had complete trust in him as her father's old friend, it was easy for him to fake some story. He must have told her that her father had sent him after her to warn her that an impostor posing as her uncle was waiting at the airport to kidnap her. Probably he told her the safest thing to do was to sneak out to Chichen Itzá and wait for him while he took care of the impostor. His plan, of course, was to get her out there where she was trapped, and kill her.

I watched his worried boyish blue eyes. It was all pitifully clear now. Deborah tricked into flying from the man who had come to save her, Deborah getting a ride from me, frightened of every car that followed, clinging to me for protection from an imaginary danger while the real danger was relentlessly catching up with her.

"You can guess the rest, Mr. Duluth. I missed her at the airport, but I managed to trace her to Chichen. By that time however, she was hopelessly afraid of me. She never gave me or my wife a chance to be alone with her that first night." He threw out his hands. "Almost before I realized there was any danger for her, Liddon had pushed her into the cenote."

FROM then on I knew more about it than he. The figure outside Deborah's window had been Liddon-Halliday. Obviously he had been making the date to meet her at the cenote, probably convincing her that her father wanted her to turn the book and the ore over to him since the danger had become too great for a young girl.

But he couldn't have convinced her, not quite. Because she had left the jar of sunburn cream with me and, at the last minute, had given me the book, too. That had been it, of course. Deborah had been shrewder than Liddon had thought and had begun to suspect him. She had been smart not to hand over the mine information to him until she was surer of him — but not smart enough to have saved her own life.

Brand's quiet voice was running on. "You'll think I'm a prize sucker, but at first in Chichen I didn't suspect murder. It was only later that I began to realize that the man who called himself Halliday was probably Liddon. You, I thought nothing of. I never dreamed Deborah had given you the book and the ore. I was sure Halliday had them.

"I realized the situation was too dangerous for my wife. I sent her home. When Mrs. Snood discovered me at the Reforma, I invented that hospital story. Since we'd posed as a bride and groom on a honeymoon, I couldn't very well tell the truth. From then on in Mexico" —he shrugged again—"I kept track of Halliday, hoping for a chance to get the stuff back from him.

"Needless to say, I was outsmarted on every side. And then yesterday, I read in the newspaper that they had finally got Joseph in Peru. I knew they'd be doing everything to force the information out of him. It was no use chasing after Halliday any more. Things had become far too serious for that. I came back here and told the whole story to the proper authorities."

"Then the Government knows everything now?"

Brand smiled his quick, disarming smile. "Yes, Mr. Duluth. At last this is

in more competent hands than mine. They have already communicated with the Peruvian Embassy. The whole ring should be cleaned up pretty soon." The smile went. "I only hope they will be in time to save Joseph."

"But there's still Halliday," I said. I almost mentioned Vera too, but I didn't.

William C. Brand shook his head. "You don't have to worry about him. He was picked up by the Federal authorities when he landed here last night."

So that was the end of Halliday. The danger which I had felt to be so imminent ever since we arrived in New Orleans had been imaginary. I thought of Vera trussed up in my bathtub and felt almost sorry for her. If she had tried to telephone Halliday, she would not have been able to reach him. In those last moments when she must have felt so near success, she had been on her own.

The story was over now. It gave me a slight sensation of awe to realize the enormous issues behind all the "sluggings and burglings and strippings" in Mexico. I began to feel a faint and purely selfish excitement too. Perhaps they wouldn't be needing me any more. Perhaps I could catch that ten o'clock plane to Iris after all.

Brand was saying: "Well, that's that. You must have had a couple of most bewildering days, Mr. Duluth. I'd like to hear exactly what happened to you. But first do you feel confident enough in me to tell me now where that ore sample is?"

I was only too glad at the prospect of disencumbering myself of it. The sooner it got to the Government laboratories the better I would be pleased. I told him about the switched bags and called the airport. To my great satisfaction, the clerk informed me that my suitcase had not yet been sent to the Lost Property office.

THE owner of the bag I had taken had raised a terrific fuss. They had opened my bag, found my name in it and, knowing me to be a passenger to New Orleans, had sent it to the downtown office while they had been feverishly calling the hotels to locate me. When I told them I had the other bag with me, they said they would send a messenger right around with mine.

While we waited, I gave Mr. Brand an exhaustive account of everything that had happened to me in Mexico City. I was still regaling him with my story when the buzzer rang. We both hurried to the door. A uniformed boy appeared up the stairs carrying my gabardine bag. I gave him the other.

Together Brand and I went back to the living room. I put the bag on the desk. I opened it, found the jar of sunburn cream and, scooping down through the cream, pulled out a small sticky lump.

Brand's hand was unsteady with excitement as he took it from me and, hurrying into the little workshop, washed it off at a faucet. When he held it up for my inspection, it was to me just a piece of faintly gleaming ore—something supremely unworthy of all the slaughter and heartache it had created.

But Mr. Brand was in a kind of mining engineer's trance. I could tell that his fingers were itching to hammer at it or crush it or put it in test tubes or do with it whatever a mining engineer does.

I, too, was itching for something—to get away. I had fulfilled my unspoken obligation to Deborah. There was nothing to keep me longer in this small private war which now had far more efficient protagonists than I. Oddly enough, although the excitement at the prospect of my reunion with Iris should have been uppermost, it was the image of Vera that dominated my thoughts.

She had tricked me and double-crossed me in every possible way. She was as much of a menace to my idea of how the world should be as Halliday. And she was completely in my power. All I had to do was to mention her to Brand, and she would be taken care of as Halliday had been.

But, absurdedly, I didn't want to mention her to Brand. I didn't really

know what I wanted to do. All I knew was that I wanted to get back to the hotel room.

Mr. Brand was still lost in a specialist's examination of the ore sample.

I said: "Well, this seems to be this. Are you going to need me any more?"

He glanced up abstractedly. "You have something else you want to do?"

"I've a date with my wife in New York," I said. "A plane to catch."

He put the ore down on a table. "Well, I don't really see any need for you to stay around. Later there will almost certainly be a private hearing in Washington. You will have to attend that, of course."

"Of course."

"Then if you leave your address with me—"

I scribbled it down. He came with me to the door. When we reached it, he held out his big hand and smiled.

"When the authorities hear what you did, Mr. Duluth, they will be very grateful."

I took the hand. "Oh, think nothing of it. Things always happen to me that shouldn't happen to dogs."

His sweet smile broadened to a grin. "Next time you take a vacation I suggest something a little less colorful. Good-by, Mr. Duluth."

"Good-by."

CHAPTER XXIV

RUNNING down the stairs, I let myself out into the street. Evening was beginning to come and, with it, the evening crowds. The little sidewalks, arched here and there by the poles supporting the iron filigree balconies, were gay with people.

Across the street, victrola music came from a balcony bright with pink geraniums and white begonias. Two large policemen were carrying on a solemn conversation at the street corner. The The Vieux Carré was almost as picturesque as a stage setting of it in a Broadway musical.

I passed the policeman and started up the next block toward the Montedoro. A girl was coming toward me. She was wearing a red suit which reminded me of Vera. Because I was thinking of Vera, I noticed her particularly. She wasn't a bit like Vera. She was smaller and dark-skinned — Latin looking. But something about the movements, the rather thick legs, the demureness of her was familiar. She was almost up to me. When she was a few feet away, I recognized her as Mr. Brand's wife, the "bride" of Chichen Itzá.

I stopped and smiled. "Hello, Mrs. Brand. I've just been visiting with your husband."

She started and looked up at me sharply as if I were a danger. Clutching her white pocketbook tightly, she made a move to go straight on. I turned and went with her.

"You don't remember me. I'm Peter Duluth. Chichen Itzá."

She still did not answer. It occurred to me that I had never heard her talk. Perhaps she didn't understand English.

"No me recuerda?" I began.

We were passing a Gifte Shoppe whose window was prematurely lit up for the night. The bright illumination played on her little figure. My eyes took her in, the hefty legs, the red skirt, the rather flat chest. Her black hair, under a small white hat, was stiffly waved, quite unattractive. But beneath it, the dark, Indian face with its big swooning eyes was quiet and pretty as a flower.

"Pretty as a flower." The words repeated themselves in my mind and with staggering quickness the whole world seemed to go topsy-turvy. For a moment the implications of what had come to me paralyzed me into a kind of panic.

It couldn't be, but it was.

Once again, more drastically than ever before in this demented affair, I had been fooled to the top of my bent. The wife of the "authentic Mr. Brand, the confidant of the United States Gov-

ernment, the uncle of Deborah" to whom I had just entrusted the sample of ore, wasn't a "wife" at all.

She was a little boy in denims, a boy with a burlap sack, a boy with a bird cage, a boy with a light blue sedan and a gun.

I wasn't walking with any Mrs. Brand. I was walking with Junior, dressed up as a demure maiden.

I realized then why the boy with the burlap sack had seemed familiar the first time I had set eyes on him outside my apartment in Mexico City. I realized a thousand things. But most virulent was the realization that I had fallen into a trap. I had betrayed Deborah Brand, after all. I had handed over the ore to an impostor, to Junior's employer, to the murderer of Deborah and Lena, too, the smoothest crook I had ever encountered—to the Enemy.

Junior was hurrying along, trying to keep his face from me. The need for sudden and violent action was imperative. Without it, all would be lost. People were passing by in both directions, chattering, laughing. Ahead, on the corner of the block, the two policemen were still in solemn conclave.

In a flash I knew what to do.

JUNIOR was almost running now. I kept at his side. We crossed the street. Just as we were abreast of the policemen, I snatched Junior's white pocketbook and sent it spinning down the sidewalk. There would be a gun in it. I knew that. Junior always had a gun.

Both the policemen swung incredulously around. In that second, I grabbed at Junior's little white hat and stiffly waved hair and tugged. They both came off in my hand, revealing his boy's black hair beneath. I threw the wig and the hat away. Junior squirmed around me and made a dash down the side street.

I shouted to the policemen: "Wanted man! Impersonating a woman. Carrying concealed weapon."

I sprinted after Junior and made a dive at him. In a couple of seconds both the policemen were panting around me. I tossed Junior into the arms of one of them. The street was littered with the contents of his pocketbook. Passersby stared, stopped and then began to crowd. In a few moments, we were completely surrounded in a chaotic, craning mob.

The confusion was just what I needed. While one of the policemen was crying: "What's going on here?" and the other, gripping Junior, was blowing his whistle, I ducked through the crowd and started to run back toward 1428B.

Junior was safely stowed. There was no question about that. No policeman in the world would release a boy unmasked in the street as a female impersonator without taking him to the station. He could be dealt with later.

Now I could think only of the ore and "Mr. Brand."

The front door of 1428B was ajar. I must have left it that way. Surprise and humiliation at my own gullibility had turned to anger now. I was seething with rage as I climbed the stairs.

I reached the fourth floor. I knocked. Junior had been coming "home." "Mr. Brand" would be expecting him. I banked on that.

I heard footsteps. The door opened. The big, red-headed hulk of "Mr. Brand" stood on the threshold.

"Why, Mr. Dulu—" he began.

But he didn't say anything more. With all my strength behind it, I shot my right fist at his jaw. It made contact with a dull thud. He blinked stupidly and, spinning half around, crumpled backward onto the floor of the hall.

I went in and kicked the door shut behind me. I could hear his heavy, erratic breathing as he floundered on the carpet. I jumped on him and hit him, once more, twice more, until he stopped moving.

I dragged him into the living room. He was out cold now. I felt through his pockets for a gun. I found one. I put it in my own pocket. I whipped off his necktie and tied his hands. I pulled the belt from around his waist and knotted it tight around his ankles.

I ran into the workshop. I felt a kind

of dizzy exhilaration. The ore sample was still there, gleaming dully on a table by the window.

Things had happened so quickly that there had been practically no time to think. Panting from my violent exertions, I pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

The ore was safe. At least there was that. But what else was there? With a twinge of anxiety, I thought: "Junior." But where had he been? He wouldn't risk a public appearance in his disguise unless it were absolutely necessary.

Had he been to the Montedoro? While "Mr. Brand" was taking care of me, had he been taking care of Vera?

I wasn't in a mood to reflect before I acted. I hurried into the living room, picked up the receiver and asked for the Montedoro Hotel.

OVER startled clucks from the hotel operator, I said: "There's a woman tied up in the bathroom of Room Six-seventeen. Let her out and tell her to come around to Fourteen-twenty-eight B Dauphine Street at once."

I rang off. Now that I had phoned, the danger of Vera seemed less frightening. Maybe Junior had been to her room. But she wouldn't have been there. Surely no one outside of a clairvoyant could have guessed that she was trussed up in my bathroom.

Probably by my muddled attack on her, I had saved her life.

My spirits soared. Because although I was still confused, I was sure now that Vera had been on the right side after all, had been on the side of the real Brand.

The real Brand. I stood in the middle of the long, untidy room with the "false Brand" unconscious at my feet. This was Brand's apartment. And yet the "false Brand" had been able to use it as a trap to inveigle the ore sample out of me. What had happened to the real Brand?

There was an obvious solution to that. Brand or Brand's body was probably right here in the apartment.

I hurried out into the little hallway. I went down it. It led to a bedroom. It was almost dark. I turned on a dim little lamp by the bed. No one was there. A door beyond led to a bathroom. The bathroom was empty, too. I was about to go back and search the workshop when I noticed a large closet in the corner.

I went to it and tried the door. It was locked, but the key was in the lock. I turned the key and opened the door.

As I did, the body of a man half-rolled out at my feet.

I dropped to my knees, easing him onto the carpet. His hands and legs were tied. Adhesive tape had been strapped across his mouth.

I pulled the tape off. It must have been painful but I didn't care about that. I was thinking of a man with his mouth taped, shoved in that airless closet with clothes half-smothering his nostrils.

He might well have been dead. He almost certainly would have been dead if I had not come when I did. But, leaning over him, I could trace the faint sound of breathing.

And he stirred. His arms quivered. He moved one leg cautiously. In the shadows which lay across the floor, I could hardly see his face. I drew him closer to the light. As I did, he opened his eyes.

He looked at me. I looked at him.

I should have realized it by then, but somehow it came as a shock. The false Brand had, of course, been the real Frank Liddon.

And the real Mr. Brand was looking dazedly up at me.

The real Mr. Brand was Bill Halliday. . . .

It was eight o'clock. William Brand, Vera Garcia and I sat together in the untidy Brand living room. The ore sample lay on the desk by the window. William Brand, whom I had known in Mexico as Bill Halliday, had recovered from his unpleasant hour in the closet.

Vera, with her lightning Slavic changes of mood, was no longer full of fury. In fact, she was enthusiastic about me again. We had learned from the

hotel that Junior had been to the Montedoro. Thanks to my efforts, she, like Brand, had probably escaped an unpleasant death.

A great deal had happened in a short time. Mr. Brand's connection with the Government was impressive. An F. B. I. man had already come and removed Frank Liddon, the erstwhile bridegroom from Yucatan. The F. B. I. had also picked up Junior at the local police precinct. They were both now safely out of the picture.

BRAND had told me his story, too. As I had expected, the version given me by Frank Liddon of the affairs beginning in Peru had been perfectly true. He had merely reversed the role played by himself and the real Brand. It had been Brand, as Halliday, who had come from New Orleans to try to protect his niece, and Liddon, as the bridegroom, who had warned her against "Halliday," lured her to Chichen Itzá and killed her.

That afternoon when he had inveigled me here to the Brand apartment, the "bridegroom" had been smart enough to realize that the true story would be the most convincing one with which to lull me into a mood of confidence where I would hand over the ore sample.

But after Deborah's death, the true story, of course, was quite different from Liddon's which from that point had been invented for my benefit. Not knowing Liddon by sight, "Halliday," seeing Deborah with me at Chichen, made the logical mistake of thinking that I was the menace.

He had seen us leaving on our early morning trip to the cenote and had followed. He had heard the scream and reached the cenote, not early enough to have seen the "bridegroom" killing Deborah, but earlier than the hotel manager and I. He had just had time to pick up the pocketbook and make his escape before we arrived in the clearing.

He had taken the pocketbook, of course, because he hoped, even with Deborah dead, that he might still salvage the chart and the ore. Neither he nor Liddon had known that the chart was in a detective story until Lena's prattle at the Reforma had made them tumble to it, and neither of them, of course, had ever had a chance to guess that Deborah had hidden the ore in the jar of sunburn cream. It was that lucky accident which had kept Liddon from searching my bathroom when he ransacked the apartment in Mexico City.

When "Halliday" found there was nothing of seeming importance in the pocketbook, although he was too cautious to throw it away until it had been analyzed for invisible writing, he was not only convinced that I had murdered Deborah, but almost sure that I had also taken the chart and the ore. He had at first completely overlooked the "bridegroom," in his concentration on me. That was why he had tried to steal my bag at the airport.

Later, in Mexico City, he had put Vera on to me. It was only after Junior slugged me at Los Remedios that he had seen his mistake and realized that the "bridegroom" and the "bride" were the real Liddon and his associate. From then on, he never exactly knew what I was—whether I was an independent crook working on my own, or whether I was in fact just an innocent tourist who had become accidentally involved.

But since Liddon and his henchmen were after me, it was obvious that I was the one who had the chart and the ore which he was so desperately trying to get. I was still the key.

After the Los Remedios episode, "Halliday's" attitude to me had become more complicated. There were two objectives for him then. One was to try either by winning my confidence or by trickery to get the chart and the ore out of me himself, the other to keep me from falling into the hands of Liddon and Junior.

Vera's function, of course, had been to win my confidence. Halliday himself had concentrated on protecting me. That was why he had rescued me from Junior in the taxi, and why he had played drunk in his apartment so that I should feel secure enough from him

to spend the night in the only place where he knew I would be safe from Junior.

MY own suspicions of him and of Vera had made everything much more difficult for them. Toward the end, Vera had been almost sure that I was what I claimed to be and felt that I should be taken into their confidence. But, because of the extreme importance of the issue at stake and because she was sure I was far too suspicious of them to believe anything they said, they had decided it was wiser to keep me in the dark and still hope to get the ore from me by trickery.

It was no wonder, I thought, that I had taken it on the chin in Mexico. I thought of the hoary old gag about the pigeon caught in the badminton game. That's what I'd been. Liddon and Junior against Vera and Halliday — with Lena Snood and me for shuttlecocks.

"If only you'd been a little dumber, Mr. Duluth," said Brand with a wry smile, "things would have been a lot easier. But you'd seen through me enough to be so suspicious of me that I knew it would be hopeless to try to confide in you. It was the same with Vera. Once you'd overheard her call to me from your apartment, she knew that whatever she did you'd never trust her.

"So long as we were all in Mexico, we had no choice. Luckily you figured out Deborah's Joan of Arc cryptogram and decided to come to New Orleans. Once you were here in our own territory, we felt reasonably sure of you. If Liddon hadn't broken in here, slugged me and taken my place, I would myself have told you the truth."

CHAPTER XXV

GRIMLY I looked at Brand. The change in his appearance since he had declared himself was astonishing. The features, even the expressions were the same, but the bumbling, businessman's convention act was completely gone. He looked what he was—a very intelligent, forceful man. I admired him profoundly as an actor.

"You certainly put on a great performance," I said.

He shrugged. "I didn't, because it didn't fool you. Liddon was the one who

[*Turn page*]

was successful. He made three attempts to kidnap you and you never suspected him. You never even recognized the boy as the 'bride' from Chichen Itzá."

"That's something I don't get," I said. "Why the female impersonation in Chichen and here in New Orleans? Just to confuse the issue?"

"Oh, no. That was strictly necessary. The F. B. I. have already identified the boy at the Peruvian Embassy. He's a notorious underworld character in Lima. In fact, right now he's wanted by the police for murder. When Liddon decided to hire him as his trigger man, the only way to smuggle him across the Border was in disguise. That's a pretty powerful organization Liddon belongs to, you know. It was easy enough for them to fake a passport with the boy as Liddon's wife."

"So that's why he never dressed up in Mexico. He only needed the red suit and the wig for crossing borders on the passport."

"Exactly." Brand's face was grave now. "Well, this has been a pretty grim affair. Deborah and poor little Mrs. Snood. I feel particularly bad about her. And Joseph too." He paused. "The Peruvian Government is already getting ready to clean up the whole group of them. I only hope they will be in time to rescue Joseph." He sighed. "But we mustn't be too gloomy about it. If Joseph is right about the thorium, and he almost certainly is, the importance of this thing's being in the right hands is incalculable. At least, after all the disasters, we have got what we needed—the ore sample and the chart."

"The chart," I echoed. "Then you've got the detective story back?"

"Oh, yes."

"The F. B. I. man found it on Liddon?"

He blinked. "No, Mr. Duluth. I've had the book for several days."

He felt in his pocket and brought out the small bright edition of "The Wrong Murder." He opened it to the back page and, leaning across the desk, held it out for my inspection. The edges of the pages showed where they had been glued together. Drawn across their center in neat, fine pencil was a detailed chart.

"The area of the vein," he said. "We already know the general neighborhood. With this, there'll be no difficulty in locating the exact position."

I looked at him blankly. "But how could you have had the book several days? Lena had it yesterday. Liddon kidnaped her and killed her for it."

"I'm afraid the copy Lena Snood had was not the right one." Brand's lips moved in a faint smile. "Remember her party at Ciro's when I arrived in a slightly intoxicated condition? On the plane from Merida, Lena said the book she was reading had been Deborah's and I guessed its importance. I came to the party with another copy I'd bought downtown. When I went to the bathroom, I took the one from beside Lena's bed and substituted the other copy."

MY admiration for William C. Brand, the actor, rose even higher. Even at his most seemingly inane, he had been on the ball. Poor Lena! After Liddon had kidnaped her, he had discovered that her book was not the right one. No wonder he had been so eager to lure me to Cuicuilco and capture me alive.

"Yes, Mr. Duluth," Brand was saying, "I had the book. All we needed was the ore sample. Thanks to your ingenuity and—well, doggedness, we have that now."

Everything was clear to me by then—almost everything.

"There's one thing," I said. "How in the world did you work that apartment on the Calle Dinamarca?"

Brand smiled at Vera. "That was easy. Vera owns a lot of real estate in Mexico. That was one of her furnished apartments that she rents. It happened to be vacant and the new tenants were moving in the next day. She gave me the key."

He glanced at his watch and got up, putting the ore sample in his pocket. "Well, I've got to be going now. I've a

date with an F. B. I. mineralogist down at the laboratory. We're going to check on this thing right away." He held out his hand. "You were planning to catch the ten o'clock plane to New York, weren't you?"

"Yes," I said.

"There's no need for you to hang around if you don't want to. Later, we'll need you. Obviously, you'll keep this under your hat. You realize its importance to America and to the world, in fact." He grinned. "Give my love to your wife."

He waved to Vera and left.

Vera got up. So did I. She was still wearing the tomato-red suit. I couldn't imagine how anyone who had spent so long trussed up in a bathtub could look so blooming.

She was smiling, her warm, generous smile. I moved closer and took her arms.

"Overwhelming women in bathrooms is not a regular habit of mine," I said. "I hope you'll forgive me."

She shook back her dark hair. "Forgive? You speak of forgive when all the time I lie and cheat and trick? It is I who say how sorry."

"There's a bouquet for you too. You certainly put on a performance to end all performances."

"Performance?" She looked indignant. "What is it, this performance? You think I am different from what I am?"

"The accent, the—"

"Still you speak from the accent?" The temper was gleaming up in her eyes. "Still you think I am the fake? This is the way I talk. Always so. If I could speak different, you think I not want to?"

"And I gues you're a ballerina too?"

"Of course I am the ballerina. The artiste of the ballet. And the critics, they say, if I work, work—"

"And you married the old Mexican?"

"What you think? He is my dream lover? Of course I marry the old man—for his money. And he die. Why you think I take the tuberoses and the lilies?"

"You're all that?" I said. "And you're working for the U. S. Government on the side. What a girl!"

"Who say I work for the U. S. Government?" Her eyes were still flashing, but she laughed her big gusty laugh. "You think they hire the girl like me with the brain of the bird? Pouf. Is ridiculous."

"Then how do you fit in this picture? I still don't see."

"How I fit?" She shrugged. "Because Mr. Brand he call me up from the telephone in Mexico and say: "Vera, I need you to help. That is how I fit."

"A friend of yours?"

"Mr. Brand?" She looked pleased. "Ah, you are jealous. You think of the foot that talks under the table. Pouf. Is crazy. That I make up. There is no foot under the table from Mr. Brand and me. My mother, you know I speak of her? She, too, is the dancer? The great—"

"Yes, I know."

"Then is that way. This mother of mine, a year ago she marry Mr. Brand."

I blinked. "So you're Halliday's stepdaughter?"

"Step? Is that what you say? Step?" She moved a little closer. Her face was tilted up to mine. "But is nonsense to talk more of such things. You think of New York, I know. You think of this—this sexy woman who waits for you."

SHE was very close and very attractive. I thought of a lot of things that would never be.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I guess I do."

"Then you telephone to her." She grinned. "Always men who are attractive are beasts to the woman. How she know when you arrive in New York? You tell her? You send the cable? No. Oh, no, she is to sit there and wait till the great big man chose to come." She brandished her arm toward the desk. "Telephone."

Vera, the champion of wives, was something new to me. But the telephone idea was a good one. I went to it and gave our New York number. It was a

strange sensation, waiting for the connection—like passing from one world to another. And then I heard Iris' voice: "Hello."

"Hello," I said.

"Peter!" Her voice was edged with excitement and the excitement came tingling through my veins, too. "Peter, where are you? In Mexico?"

"No," I said. "New Orleans. I'm catching the ten o'clock plane."

"New Orleans. What happened? Get grounded?"

I glanced at Vera. "No, I didn't get grounded. It's quite a story."

"A story? You mean something's happened? Something exciting?"

"It was. Very exciting."

"With nice people?"

I glanced at Vera again. "Wonderful people. Out of this world."

"I can't wait to hear. I can't wait for you to come back anyway."

I thought of her at the other end of the wire. Just the thought of her was enough to make everything else seem faintly unreal.

"I can't wait either, Iris."

"Then hurry. You don't have much time. Get off the phone quick. Good-by, darling."

"Good-by."

I put the receiver back on the stand. Vera had crossed to my side. Under the black, woolly lashes, her eyes were almost wistful.

"Wonderful people," she repeated. "Is me?"

I smiled at her. "Is you."

A shadow of suspicion crossed her face. "But what is it, this out of this world?"

I put my arms around her and kissed her. It was a sad kind of kiss, remembering things that had never happened.

"Out of this world," I said, "is marvelous, beautiful, charming, clever—the greatest artiste of the ballet in four hemispheres. . . ."

Two weeks later, Iris and I were lying in bed together, eating breakfast and playing with the Sunday paper. As Iris leaned across me to reach for the drama section and the announcement of the casting of my play, I noticed a small paragraph at the bottom of the page I was reading. It said:

AMERICAN ARCHEOLOGIST
RETURNS FROM JUNGLE

It went on to announce that Joseph Brand, well-known Finnish-American archeologist, had mysteriously showed up again at the camp of his expedition. That was all it said, but I could read a lot more into it. The Peruvian Government had been busy.

Liddon's associates were almost certainly in the bag.

"Darling," said Iris, brandishing the drama section, "there's a wonderful picture of me. Look. It's one of the new ones. Hasn't it come out well?"

I slid my arm around her and looked. "Lindissima," I said.

She glanced at me suspiciously. "What's that? Lindissima?"

"Beautiful," I said.

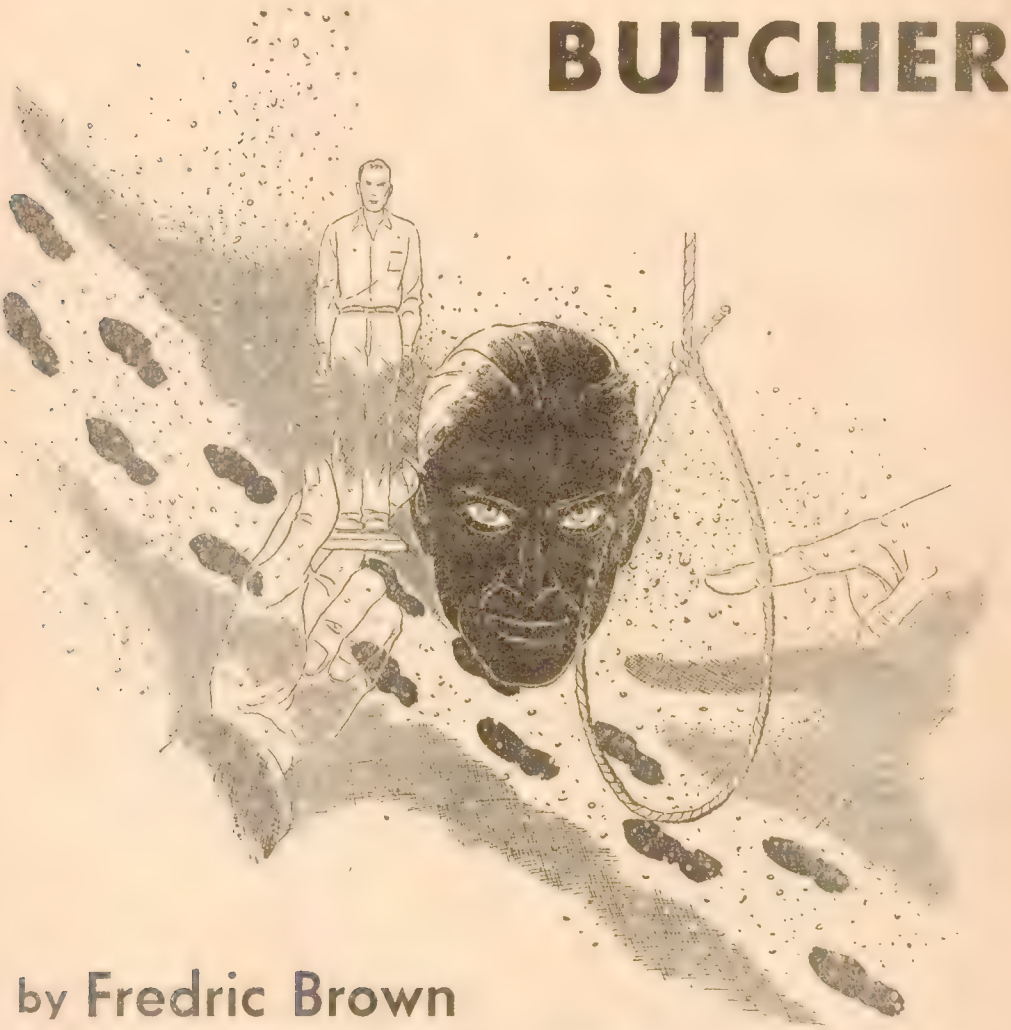
Private Investigator Eddie McCrae takes the trail of the Phantom Blonde in next issue's featured novel—

THE LADY IN QUESTION

By WILL OURSLER

THE *Laughing* BUTCHER

The Corbyville Horror was a black magician but his incantations were of no avail when he was hoist by his own voodoo



by Fredric Brown

YESTERDAY must have been a dull day for news, because the Chicago *Sun* gave three inches to the funeral of a dwarf downstate, in Corbyville.

"Listen to this, Bill," Kathy said, and Wally—(that's my only in-law, Kathy's brother)—and I looked up from our game of cribbage.

"Yeah?" I said. Kathy read it to us.

Then she said, "Johnny, wasn't that—" She let it trail off.

I looked at her warningly, because of her brother being there with us, and I said, "The dwarf that beat you at a game of chess five years ago? Yeah, that was the one."

Wally put down his last card on the one I'd just played, said, "Thirty-one for two," and pegged it. I scored my

hand and he scored his and the crib, and it put him out and ended the game.

"Five years ago," he said. "And yesterday was your anniversary. That'd put it on your honeymoon, if it was exactly five years ago, I mean. She play chess with dwarfs on your honeymoon?"

"One dwarf," I told him. "One game. In Corbyville. And she got beaten."

"Served her right," Wally said. "Look, Bill—wasn't it about that time, five years ago, they lynched a guy in Corbyville? The case they called 'The Corbyville Horror'?"

"A few weeks after that," I said.

"The guy was a butcher, and a black magician, or something. Or they thought he was. Killed somebody by magic, or . . . What was it about, anyway?"

I was looking at the window, and the window was a black, blank square of night, and I wanted to shiver, but with Wally watching me that way, I couldn't. I got up and walked over to the window instead, so I could look down on the lights and traffic of Division Street instead of at the black night above it.

"It was the butcher they lynched," I said. I turned around from the window. "We met him, too."

Wally picked up his glass of beer and took a sip of it.

"Some of it's coming back to me," he said. "Corbyville's that circus town, isn't it? Town where a lot of ex-circus-people live?"

I nodded.

"And this Corbyville Horror business. Wasn't a guy found out in the middle of a field of snow, dead, with two sets of footprints leading up to his body and none leading away from it?"

"That's right," I said.

"And one set of footprints was his own and the other set just led to the body and vanished as though the guy had flown?"

"Yes," I said.

"I remember now. And the town lynched this butcher-magician because he had a down on the guy who was killed, and—"

"Something like that."

"They never did find out what really happened?" Wally asked.

"No."

HE took another sip of beer and shook his head.

"I remember now that it puzzled me. How could a set of tracks go halfway across a field of snow and then stop, and not either come back or go on?"

"One set's easy to explain," I said. "I mean, those of the guy they found dead out there in the field."

"Sure, him. But what about the one who chased him? He did chase him, didn't he? I mean, if I remember rightly, his footprints were on top of the dead man's in the snow."

"That's right," I said. "I saw those footprints myself. Of course by the time I saw them, there were a lot of other prints around and they'd taken the body away, but I talked to the men who found the body, and they were sure of their description of those prints, and of the fact that there weren't any other ones around, within a hundred yards."

"Didn't somebody suggest ropes?"

"No trees or telephone poles anywhere near. Nope."

Kathy went and got us some more beer. I asked Wally if he wanted another game of cribbage. "No," he said. "The story."

I poured his glass full and then mine.

"What do you want to know, Wally?" I asked.

"What killed him?"

"Heart failure," I said.

"But—what was chasing him?"

"Nothing was chasing him," I said slowly. "Nothing at all. He wasn't running away from anybody or anything. It was more horrible than that."

I went over and sat down in the big armchair. Kathy came over and curled up on my lap like a contented kitten. Over her shoulder I could see that black square of night that was the open window.

"It was much more horrible than that, Wally," I repeated slowly. "He wasn't running away from something. He was running toward something. Something out in the middle of that field."

Wally laughed uneasily. "Bill," he said, "you don't talk like a Chicago copper. You talk like a fey Irishman. What was out in that field?"

"Death," I told him.

That held him for a minute. Then he asked, "What about the one-way tracks,

FREDRIC BROWN HONORED BY MYSTERY WRITERS

FREDRIC BROWN (on the right), author of "The Laughing Butcher," receiving the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award for the best first mystery novel published in 1947 for his book "The Fabulous Clipjoint" which first appeared in MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE under the title of "Dead Man's Indemnity" and was subquently published in book form by E. P. Dutton & Company as "The Fabulous Clipjoint."

The donor of the award, a porcelain bust of Edgar Allan Poe, is Percival Wilde, well-known mystery author and creator of the famous fictional sleuth, P. Moran, Operative, representing the Mystery Writers of America. The occasion was the Third Annual Edgar Allan Poe Awards Dinner at the Sheraton Hotel in New York City.

MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE is proud to have been the first to recognize the talents of Fredric Brown and to have been able to publish his first novel.

"The Fabulous Clipjoint" has since been succeeded by a second successful novel, "The Dead Ringer," which also had first publication in MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE.

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the ones that led to the body and not away from it?"

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It was warm and pleasant up there on top of the hill, I remember. I stopped the car at the side of the muddy road, put my arm around Kathy and kissed her, with the soundness that a second-day-of-honeymoon kiss deserves. We had been married the morning before, in Chicago, and were driving south. I had arranged a month off and we figured to get to New Orleans and back, driving leisurely, and stopping off wherever we wished. We had spent the first night of our honeymoon in Decatur, a town I'll never forget.

I won't forget Corbyville, either, but not for the same reason. But of course I didn't know that then. I pointed to the view through the windshield and down the hill into the valley, bright green and muddy brown from the recent rains. And with a little village at the bottom of it—three score or so of houses huddled together like frightened sheep.

"Ain't it purty?" I said.

"Beautiful," Kathy said. "The valley, I mean. Is that Corbyville? Where are the elephants? Didn't I read they used elephants for the plowing outside Corbyville?"

I laughed at her. "One elephant, and it died years ago. I guess there are a lot of the circus people left there, though. Maybe we'll see some of them when we drive through."

"I forget the story, Bill," Kathy said. "Why is it so many circus people live there? Some circus owner—"

"Old John Corby," I said. "He owned about the third biggest circus in the country and made a fortune from it. That was the town he came from—it had some other name then—and he put all his profits into the land there, got to own nearly the whole town and valley.

"And when he died, his will left

houses and stores and farms to people in his circus, on the condition that they lived there. A lot of 'em wouldn't of course; weren't ready to settle down, and went with some other circus instead. But a lot of 'em did take what was left them and live there. Out of a population of a thousand or so, two-three hundred, I think, are ex-circus-people . . . Did I ever tell you I love you, Kathy?"

"I seem to remem. . . Bill, not here! You—"

SO after a minute I slid the car in gear and started down the slippery, winding road down into the valley. We were off the main highway, coming in on a side road that wasn't used much, and it was pretty bad. The mud was inches deep in the ruts. It wasn't too bad until we were just a half-mile outside the village, and then suddenly the wheels were sliding and the back end of the car, despite my efforts with the wheel, slewed around and went off the road. I tried to start, and the back wheels spun in mud that was like soup.

I said appropriate words, suitably modified to fit Kathy's presence, and got out of the car into ankle-deep mud. I looked at the car, then looked around.

There was a little three-room frame farmhouse only a few dozen paces away, and a stocky, blond man of about thirty was already walking from the house toward the car.

He grinned at me.

"Nice roads we got here," he said. "You in very deep?"

"Not too bad," I told him. "If you can give me a hand, maybe two of us—"

"Wish I could," he said. "But anything heavy's against the rules. I've got a bum ticker. The doc won't let me pick up anything heavier than a potato, and I got to do that slow." He looked up and down the road. "We might get you out with some gunnysacks or boards, but it'd hardly be worth the trouble. Pete Hobbs is about due by here. He's the mailman."

"Drive a truck?"

The blond man laughed. "Sure, but he won't need it. Pete used to be a strong man with Corby. He's getting old, but he can still pick up the back end of your car with one hand. You and the missus want to drop in the house till Pete gets here?"

Kathy had been listening, and she must have liked the man because she said sure, we'd be glad to.

So we went in, and it was half an hour before the mailman came along and we got to know the Wilsons fairly well, for half an hour. That was the blond man's name, Len Wilson. His wife, Dorothy, was a stunner. Almost as pretty as Kathy.

No, Len Wilson told us, he hadn't been with any circus. He had been born right here on this small farm, and Dorothy had been born in Corbyville. They had been married four years, and you could see they were still in love. I noticed how considerate they were of each other; how, when we started up to get an ash tray for me, Dorothy spoke almost sharply to him to make him sit down again. The sort of sharpness one might use on a child.

I remember wondering how, since Len couldn't exert himself physically, he managed to run a farm, even a small one. Maybe he knew I'd be wondering that. Anyway, he told me the answer.

"I can work all right," he told men, "as long as it isn't heavy, and I keep at a steady, dogged pace. I can lift a thousand pounds—about ten pounds at a time. I can walk a hundred miles, if I walk slowly and rest once in a while. And I can run a farm, a little one like this, the same way. Not that I get rich doing it." He grinned a little.

A honking out front brought us to our feet, and Dorothy Wilson said:

"That's Pete. I'll run ahead and be sure to catch him."

The rest of us followed more slowly, Kathy and I matching our pace to Len's. The ex-strong man got out of his mail truck and he and I easily lifted the car's back end around to where the wheels would find traction.

As I got under the wheel, Len waved.

"Might see you in town, if you're stopping there," he said. "I'm riding in with Pete."

Anyway, that was how we met Len Wilson. We saw him only once more, in Corbyville, a little later.

I was going to drive on through, I remember, but Kathy wanted to stop and

eat. I parked the car in front of a clean-looking hamburger joint and we went in. That was where we met the dwarf.

I remember thinking, when we first went in and sat down at the counter, that there was something strange and out of proportion about the five-foot-tall little man who nodded to us from behind the counter and took our orders. But I didn't realize what it was until he walked back to the grill to put on the hamburgers we ordered. He wasn't five feet tall at all; he was about three feet. The area back of the counter was built up, about two feet higher than the floor in the rest of the room.

HE saw me lean over the counter and look down, and grinned at me.

"My chin'd just about come to the level of the counter without that arrangement," he said.

"You ought to get a patent on it," Kathy said. "Say, isn't that a chess board down there at the end of the counter?"

He nodded. "I was working out a problem. You play?"

That was better than the smell of the hamburgers to Kathy. Few women like chess, but she's one of the few, even if she doesn't look like it. To look at Kathy you'd think gin rummy would be her top intellectual entertainment, but you'd be fooled. She's got more brains and more education than I. Got a master's degree and would probably be teaching if she hadn't decided to marry me, instead. Which, I'll admit, was a big waste of brains.

Kathy told him she played and how about a quick game? And she wasn't kidding on the quick part; she really does move fairly fast, and the dwarf—I noticed with relief—kept up with the pace she set. I know enough about chess, due to Kathy, to follow the moves, and when a game goes fairly quick, I can stay interested watching it.

Kathy had the men set up by the time he brought our hamburgers and coffee, and I watched until midgame while I ate. Then I strolled front to the doorway and stood leaning against the jamb, looking out across the street.

Directly across from me, in the doorway of the butcher shop, a butcher in a white apron was doing the same thing. My gaze passed him over lightly the first time, then went back to him and got stuck there. At first, I didn't even know why.

Then a child—a girl of about six or seven—came skipping along the street, noticed him when she was a dozen paces away, and stopped skipping. She circled widely, almost to the outer curb, to keep as much distance as possible between herself and the butcher. He didn't seem to notice her at all, and once she was safely behind his back, she started skipping again.

Definitely, I realized, she had been afraid of him.

It could have been nothing, of course; a child who'd been scolded for filching a wiener from the butcher shop, but—well, it didn't seem like that.

It didn't seem like that because what happened made me look at the butcher's face. It was calm, impassive. If he had noticed the child, he had neither frowned nor smiled at the wide circle she had made. And the face itself was handsome, but . . . I shivered a little.

A Chicago cop gets used to seeing faces that aren't nice to look at. He sees faces daily that might be Greek masks of hate or lust or avarice. He gets used to hopped-up torpedoes and crazy killers. He takes faces like that in his stride; they're his business.

But this wasn't that sort of face. It was an evil face, but subtly evil. The man's features were straight and regular and his eyes were clear. The evil was behind the face, behind the eyes. I couldn't even put my finger on how I knew it was there. It wasn't something I could see; it was something I felt.

The part of my brain that's trained to observe and remember was cataloguing the rest of him as well—I don't know why. Height, five eleven; weight, one eighty; age, about forty; black hair, brown eyes, olive complexion; distinguishing features—an aura of evil.

I wondered what the looie in charge of my precinct would say if I turned in a report like that.

I strolled back into the restaurant and looked at the chess game, mildly wishing Kathy would be through so she could leave with me while the butcher was still standing there. I wondered what her reaction to him would be.

There were still a lot of pieces on the board, though. Kathy looked up at me.

"Having trouble," she admitted. "This gentleman really knows how to play chess. Why aren't you smart like that, Bill?"

The dwarf grinned without looking up, and moved a pawn.

"She's played this game before, too," he said. "It's even so far."

"But not now," Kathy said.

I looked at the pieces and saw what she meant. The dwarf had left one of his knights unprotected. Kathy's hand hovered over the board a moment, then her bishop swooped to conquer.

"Attababy," I said to Kathy and patted her shoulder. "Take your time," I told her. "It's only our honeymoon."

I strolled back to the doorway. The white-aproned butcher was still there.

OUT of the doorway of the store next door to the butcher shop came Len Wilson. He walked, as before, slowly. He walked toward the butcher shop. I started to hail him, to ask him to come over and have a cup of coffee with me while Kathy and the dwarf finished their game. I had my mouth open to call to him, but I didn't.

Len Wilson caught the butcher's eye, and stopped. There was something so peculiar about his way of stopping, as though he had run into a brick wall, that I didn't yell. I watched, instead.

The butcher was smiling, but it wasn't a nice smile. He said something, but I couldn't hear it across the street, nor could I hear what Len answered. It was like watching a movie whose sound track had stopped working.

I saw the butcher reach into his pocket and take something out, hold it casually in his hand. It looked like a tiny doll, about two inches long. It could have been made of wax. He did something. I couldn't see what, with the doll between his hands.

Then he said something again—several sentences—and chuckled. I could hear that chuckle across the street, even though I hadn't heard the words. It wasn't loud, but it carried. And Len Wilson's fists clenched, and he started forward—not slowly at all—for the butcher.

I started, too, at the same time. There wasn't any mistaking the expression on Len's face. His intention wasn't any intention that a man with a bad ticker should have. He was going to take a poke at that butcher, a man bigger than he was and husky looking besides, and for a man in Len's shape it was going to be just too bad unless that one poke did the work.

But Len had been only a few steps away, and I'd been across the street. I saw him swing wildly and miss, and then an auto horn and squealing brakes made me step back just in time to keep from getting killed in the middle of the street. When I looked again, the tableau had changed. The big butcher was standing behind Len, with Len's arm doubled in a hammerlock. Len's face was red with either pain or futile anger, or both.

I took a quick look for traffic both ways this time before I started across toward them. I don't mind telling you that I was afraid. Not physically afraid of that butcher, but—well, there was something about him that had made me want to hit him, even before Len had come along, but that made me afraid to do it, too.

Suddenly I noticed that Kathy and the dwarf were with me, Kathy abreast of me on one side, and the dwarf scuttling by me on the other side, his short legs going like piston rods as he passed me.

"Let go of him, Kramer, curse you!" he was yelling.

The butcher let go of Len, and Len almost collapsed, leaning back against the building. The dwarf got to Len first, and reached into Len's vest pocket. He came out with a little box of pills. He handed them to me.

"Give him one, quick," he said. "I can't reach."

I got the box open—they were nitro pills, I noticed—and got Len to take one.

"Take him across to my place," the dwarf was saying. "Make him sit down and rest."

And Kathy was on Len's other side and we were helping him across the street.

The dwarf wasn't with us. I saw that Len seemed to be breathing normally and making it all right, then I glanced back over my shoulder.

Again it was a conversation I couldn't hear, but could see. The dwarf's face, on a level with the butcher's belt, was dark with fierce anger. There was smiling amusement on the butcher's face, and again I felt that impact of evil.

The butcher said something. The dwarf took a step forward and kicked viciously at the butcher's shin. He connected, too.

I almost stopped, thinking I'd have to let Kathy support Len while I ran back to rescue the foolhardy dwarf.

But the butcher didn't make a move. Instead, he leaned back against the door post of his shop and laughed. Great peals of loud laughter that must have been audible a full block away. He didn't even lean down to rub his kicked shin. He laughed.

He was still laughing when Kathy and I had taken Len through the open doorway of the restaurant. I turned around and the dwarf, his face almost purple with thwarted anger, was crossing the street after us, and the butcher still stood there laughing. It wasn't a nice laugh at all. It made me want to kill him, and I've got a pretty even disposition myself.

WE let Len down into one of the seats at a booth, and the dwarf was beside us, his face calm again. I glanced out through the window and saw that the butcher was gone, probably back into his shop. And the silence, after that laughter, seemed blessed.

"Shall I get Doc?" the dwarf asked Len.

Len Wilson shook his head. "I'm all right. That nitro pill fixed me up. Just let me sit and rest a minute or two."

"Cup of coffee while you're resting?"

"Sure," Len said. "And make me a hamburger, will you, Joe? Haven't eaten much."

Kathy sat down across from Len in the booth and I went back with the dwarf named Joe. He went up the ramp that led to the raised area back of the counter and he wasn't a dwarf any more. He was five feet tall and his eyes were higher than mine as I sat at one of the counter stools opposite the hamburger grill. He took a hamburger patty from the refrigerator and slapped it on the grill, and then I caught his eye.

"What," I asked, jerking my thumb in the direction of the butcher shop, "was that?"

"That," he said, "was Gerhard Kramer." He made it sound like profanity.

"And who is Gerhard Kramer?"

"A nice guy," he said, "if you listen to some people who think so. Most of us don't. Some of us are pretty close to thinking he's the devil himself."

"Outside of a butcher," I asked, "who is he? What was he?"

"Used to be with Corby's circus. Sideshow magician and mentalist. He makes a better butcher. But he still keeps on with magic—only the black kind, the serious kind."

"He really believes in it? Wax dolls and that sort of stuff?"

"You saw that doll, then? Well, he makes people believe he believes in it. Got half the town scared stiff of him."

"Yet they buy in his store?"

He flipped over the hamburger frying on the grill. "They're afraid not to, I guess, if it comes to that. Oh, and some of the women aren't afraid of him. He's attractive to women. He does all right. He owns a good share of the town. Probably likes cutting up dead animals or he wouldn't have to run that shop. Yeah, he does all right."

Something in his tone of voice made me ask, "Except what?"

He slit a bun and put the hamburger in it, drew a cup of coffee, and started around the counter with them. I stayed still. I knew he'd answer my question when he got back.

He came back and said, "Len's wife, mister. That's the one thing he wants and can't have."

"Dorothy?" I asked, surprised. I don't know why I was surprised.

He looked so puzzled that I realized he hadn't known that we had stopped at the Wilson's place on our way into Corbyville. He had thought that our first sight of Len had been across the street. I told him about it.

"Yes, Dorothy," he said. "She was a town girl before she married Len. Kramer wanted her and Len took her out from under his nose. Kramer's hated Len ever since. And, blast him, he'll probably get her if Len isn't more careful of himself. He'll keel over and leave a clear field."

"But won't Dorothy Wilson have something to say about that?" I asked. "Would she marry a—a guy like Kramer?"

He looked gloomy. "I told you women like him. She likes him—can't see anything wrong with him. Oh, I don't mean she'd cheat on Len, or anything like that. But if Len would die, why, after a year or so—"

"And that doll," I said. "That wax doll. Does that mean Kramer doesn't want to wait till Len dies naturally, if he does? Does Kramer really believe in that kind of magic?"

The dwarf looked at me cynically. "Sometimes that kind of magic can work, mister," he said. "You saw it blame near work just now, when he showed it to Len."

I saw what he meant. I got up and went back to the front of the store. Len looked better, and Kathy was talking to him animatedly.

"I've just learned Len plays chess, Bill," she said. "He's a friend of Joe Laska—that's the man who runs the restaurant here—and says they play a lot. We could have played a game out at Len's house while we were there."

"Sure," I said, "only you didn't. How'd you come out on the game with Joe? You were a knight ahead, I remember, and I see he put the board back, so I guess you finished."

"Yes, we'd finished. We were coming out to join you just when—when the trouble started across the street."

WITH Len sitting there, I didn't want to go into that, I'd tell Kathy later what it was all about. "Who won?" I asked quickly.

"Joe, darn him. That business of giving me the knight was a gambit. He checkmated me four moves later."

Len grinned, a little weakly. "Joe's a great guy for those gambits, lady. If you play with him again, watch out any time he offers you a piece for free."

The dwarf came back then and said that he was going to get a car to take Len home. But I wouldn't hear of that, of course. I made Len get into my car—he could walk all right by now—and Kathy and I drove him home.

Dorothy Wilson took a look at Len as he came through the door and hurried him off upstairs to put him to bed for the rest of the day. She had called back, asking us to wait, and we did.

But when she came down, it turned out she had wanted us to wait so she could offer us something to eat, and we explained that we had just eaten in town. So Dorothy walked out to the car with us.

"Joe Laska phoned me," she said. "He said—well, I gathered that Len tried again to start a fight with Gerry Kramer. Oh, I wish Len wouldn't be so foolish. To hear Len—and Joe, too—talk, you'd think Gerry was a devil or something."

Something made me ask, "And isn't he?"

She laughed a little. "He's one of the nicest men in town. The men around here don't like him because he's handsome and polished and—well, you know how small town people are."

"Oh," I said.

"But he's nice, really. Why, he holds a mortgage on this place of ours, overdue. He could put Len and me off any time he wanted, but he doesn't, in spite of the way Len acts about him."

I didn't want to hear any more of it. I wanted to say, "Sure, he'd rather let Len stay on a farm and work himself to death than maybe take out to a city somewhere and get a softer job where he could last a longer time."

But I didn't say it. I had no business to, just because I hadn't liked a man's face, and his laugh.

We said good-by to Mrs. Wilson and drove off.

After a while, I said, "Women—" disgustedly, and then asked Kathy what she had thought of the butcher.

"I don't really know," she said. "He is good-looking all right, and maybe Mrs. Wilson is right, but—well, I wouldn't trust him. There seemed to be something wrong about him, Bill. Something—uh—wicked, evil."

And since she was smart enough to have seen that for herself, I told her, as we drove along, everything that I had seen and what Joe, the dwarf, had told me.

We talked about it quite a while. There had been something about that scene in front of the butcher shop, and about the situation back of it, that

wasn't going to be easy to forget. We wouldn't have forgotten it, I'm sure, even if it had ended there.

But after a while it slid into the back of our minds. We were, after all, on our honeymoon.

We drove to New Orleans and spent a wonderful two weeks in the marvelous fall weather they have there, and I remember the warmth was all the more wonderful when we read in the papers that Illinois and Indiana had been having early snows.

We started driving back then, leisurely. We didn't plan our route from day to day, and I don't know whether we would have driven through Corbyville at all, if we hadn't happened to buy a Centralia newspaper in Metropolis, just after we'd crossed the Ohio River from Paducah.

BUTCHER LYNCHED
IN CORBYVILLE

And in that first story there wasn't any play-up at all of the "Corbyville Horror" angle that made Sunday supplements all over the country. The lynching—it was the first in a long time in the State of Illinois—was the angle of the Centralia paper.

Apparently the reporters hadn't actually been on the scene as yet, because there weren't many details. I read the story out loud to Kathy, then she took the paper away from me and read it again to herself, while I sat and thought, and finished my coffee.

IT seemed, according to the Centralia paper, that one Len Wilson, a farmer living just outside Corbyville, had died under rather mysterious circumstances, and that the people of the town blamed the local butcher, Gerhard Kramer, for Wilson's death. The sheriff, summoned from Centralia, had refused to arrest Kramer for lack of evidence.

And while the sheriff was out at the farm a group of townsmen, who had already been out at the farm, yanked Gerhard Kramer out of his butcher shop and strung him up on the light pole right in front of the store. Sheriff's deputies had been unable to find out who—outside, I suppose, of Kramer himself—had been involved in the lynching.

I paid our check in the restaurant and we went out and got in the car.

"Are you going through Corbyville?" Kathy asked.

"Yes," I said. "I want to know what happened. Don't you?"

"I guess so, Bill," she said.

We got to Corbyville about two o'clock. It was a quiet town when we drove down the main street. It was unnaturally quiet.

I drove slowly. The butcher shop, I noticed, was closed, although there wasn't any wreath on the door. The hamburger stand across from it, the dwarf's place, was closed too. There, there was a sign on the door that read:

CLOSED TILL MONDAY

I drove on out to the Wilson farm.

There was still an inch of snow on the ground, and it was cold, unseasonably cold for early October. There were cars parked in front—four of them.

We got out and walked back where there was a little knot of men standing beside a fence, and beyond the fence was an open field. I could see the footprints—the two sets of footprints that the Sunday supplements and all the newspapers made so much of. Alongside of them were other prints now, of course, ones that would not have been there when the first ones were made.

I took a good look at those tracks, without climbing over the fence. You've read about them, and they were just what the papers said. Two sets of tracks led out across that snow-covered field; neither set came back. It put a little chill down your spine to look at them, to visualize how they had looked to the first men there, those who had discovered the body, when the rest of the field was virgin white.

Len Wilson's footprints were a little the smaller of the two sets. You could tell which they were easily enough. He had been running, fast. The other set had been made after Len's. In places one of the bigger prints came on top of one of Len's.

Kathy stood staring at them, studying them.

I talked a few minutes to the men who were standing around. One was a deputy sheriff stationed there. He wanted to know who I was, and I showed him my

Chicago credentials, and explained that I'd known Len slightly, and was interested for that reason. The other three men were reporters. One all the way from Chicago.

"Where is Mrs. Wilson?" I asked.

I didn't particularly want to talk to Dorothy Wilson, but I felt that if she was in the house, Kathy and I should go there, at least for a minute.

"With her folks in Corbyville," the Chicago reporter told me. "Say, those tracks. It's the darndest thing." He turned and stared at them. Then he said, "I guess I can see why they lynched that butcher. If he hated Len Wilson, and if he went in for black magic—well, if this isn't, what the devil is?"

The deputy sheriff spat over the fence. He started to say something, noticed Kathy, and changed his mind. He cleared his throat and said, "Black magic, phoeey! But I'd still like to know how he did it. He was a circus sideshow magician, but even so—"

"Are those other footprints his?" I asked.

"His size. I don't think they found the particular pair of shoes that made them. He probably ditched 'em."

"I—I guess I'm a little scared," Kathy said.

"I'm a lot scared," I told her.

We got in the car and drove away, north toward Chicago and home.

"It—it's horrible, Bill," Kathy said, after a while.

"What was he running from?"

"Nothing, Kathy," I told her. "He was running toward."

I told her how I figured it and why, and her eyes got wider and scareder. When I finished, she grabbed my arm. "Bill," she said, "You're a—a policeman. Does that mean you'll have to—to tell?"

I shook my head. "If I had any evidence, yes. But an opinion is my own, even if we know it's right."

Kathy relaxed, but we didn't talk much the rest of the way to Chicago.

* * * * *

WALLY said, "All right, my beloved brother-in-law, I'm dumb and you're a big, smart copper. I don't get it." He downed the last of his beer and put the empty glass down quietly. "What was he running toward?"

"Death," I said. "I told you that. Death, out in the middle of that field, standing there waiting for him. He was pretty sick, Wally. I'm guessing he knew he didn't have long to live anyway. Otherwise, it wouldn't have made too much sense. But he loved Dorothy, and he hated that laughing butcher, Kramer. He knew that he was going to die, anyway, and if he died in such a manner that the town would figure Kramer did it, either by black magic or by some trick of sleight of hand—"

"Sleight of foot," said Wally.

"All right, sleight of foot," I amended. "He'd have his revenge on Kramer. And the town knowing Kramer, knowing how Kramer hated Len and wanted him to die, would blame the butcher if there was any supernatural-looking angle to Len's death, anything unexplainable. Even if he wasn't arrested or lynched, the town would believe he had something to do with it. He'd have to leave. So by dying that way, a little sooner, Len got his revenge on a man he must have hated almost as much as he loved Dorothy—and he saved Dorothy from her blindness. She probably would have married Kramer after a while, because for some reason she was blind to the evil in him. Don't you see?"

Kathy stirred in my lap.

"Like in chess, Wally," she said. "A gambit—where you make a sacrifice to win. Like Joe, the dwarf, gave me a knight, and then checkmated me. That's how Joe and Len, playing chess on the same side of the board for once, checkmated the butcher."

"Huh?" Wally said. "The dwarf was in on it?"

"He had to be," I said. "Who else could have made the footprints that led only one way from the body to the fence. Who besides the dwarf could have ridden on Len's shoulders while he ran like mad out into the field until his heart gave way, and who but a dwarf could have fastened a pair of Kramer's shoes on, backward?"

Next Issue: THE WRONG ENVELOPE, an Exciting Lieutenant Trant Mystery Novelet by Q. PATRICK—and Many Other Stories!

ELIZABETH took a walk

or

WAS SHE KIDNAPED?

by LEO MARR

The true story of the celebrated Canning Case!

IT WAS on New Year's day in the year 1753 that young Elizabeth Canning set dainty foot outside her door in the east end of London and disappeared from the sight of man as thoroughly as ever did Judge Crater, a century and a half later.

With one difference—Elizabeth came back. She showed up just four weeks later to the day, dirty, ragged, bruised and bleeding from a slash on one ear which was bound up with a dirty handkerchief. And she told a story of abduction and abuse which

brought the death sentence to one woman and the branding, with red-hot iron, of the letter "T" for "Thief" upon the hand of another.

The resluting controversy rocked two hemispheres and is not settled today. Was Elizabeth Canning a noble, martyred little heroine who struggled bravely through unimaginable terrors, or was she a psychopathic little liar who made up a fantastic story to cover her own mischief, a liar who, without a trace of feeling, saw an innocent woman condemned to death because of it?

This was no tempest in a teapot. For at least a year, Elizabeth Canning was the most famous person in the world. Her supporters were called Canningites and those who thought she was a liar were called Egyptians. And whenever the two factions met there was a pitched free-for-all battle in the streets. The Lord Mayor of London, who was an Egyptian, was dragged from his coach by Canningites and nearly lynched.

She was only eighteen years old; a rosy-cheeked, healthy, rather good-looking girl of small stature, not more than five feet tall. She worked as a house servant for a family named Lyons who lived in the east end, just a few blocks away from her own home. She was a good girl—in the most flattering sense of the word, and no adverse reports as to her character or habits are known.

On this New Year's day she did not work, so planned to visit her aunt and uncle who lived still further east. Uncle Colley was a glass-blower and it was interesting to watch him work. She dressed herself carefully in a purple gown, with a white hat adorned with green ribbons. She had some money on her and a small mince pie which she had bought for a younger brother.

Elizabeth spent the day at the Colley's. When she prepared to leave around nine o'clock, they walked part way back with her. This part of London was still not completely built up and there were open lanes and dark streets of rather forbidding aspect. Though it has no bearing on the Canning case, this region, Whitechapel, was later on the very place where Jack-The-Ripper operated—in every meaning of the word.

Her aunt and uncle walked a good piece with her and left her along Houndsditch, feeling she was now on home ground and safe. She said good night to them, walked into the darkness and disappeared.

ABOUT the time Elizabeth left the Colley home, her employer, Mr. Lyons came to her own house asking for her, since her holiday was over and she was due back before nine. Mrs. Canning was already worried.

"The child should have been home before now," she said and her anxiety was communicated to the family and neighbors.

A disorganized search was begun and by midnight someone got back to the Colley house and awakened the aunt and uncle. When their story was told, anxiety was replaced by fear.

With daylight, the suspicion of foul play had become a certainty and a search was begun by alarmed friends. Jails and hospitals were searched without results and rewards offered by way of the newspapers for information.

The only information which resulted was that a woman came in with a story of having heard a woman scream in a hackney coach near Houndsditch. And this thin clue was all the doubtful word from Elizabeth Canning for a long month.

She had been given up as lost and gone by a sorrowing mother when, one night, without warning or preliminaries, the door opened and she was home. It was with difficulty that her own mother recognized her. Her gown was gone. She had on an ancient, torn and filthy shirt and over this was a dressing gown that was a refugee from a ragpicker. A bloody handker-

chief covered one ear.

When the shrieks had died away and the house filled with avid and babbling neighbors, Elizabeth made herself heard.

"Please give me something to eat, mother—I'm starved nearly to death. I've had nothing but bread and water for weeks and none of that since last Friday."

Food was trust upon her and a hundred voices shouted questions at once. The story which came out of Elizabeth was, unfortunately, not recorded with any great accuracy at once, and it changed thereafter each time she told it. But as later reported by those present, it seemed to run something on this order:

"I went through Houndsditch, after my aunt and uncle left me. Then just past Bethlehem Hospital, two men in greatcoats came out of the shadows and caught me. They took my money, a half guinea and some silver shillings. Then one tore off my hat and apron and dress."

Thinking, as any well-bred girl might, that her honor was in danger, Elizabeth screamed loudly. Whereat one of the men cursed luridly and struck her with his fist on the forehead.

"Stop that noise!" he growled. 'We'll do for you presently!"

Elizabeth knew enough to faint at this juncture and did so promptly. It was hours later that she came to her senses and found herself being half led, half dragged along a country road with water in the ditches at the side.

"Where are you taking me?" she cried.

And like the writing in another Alice In Wonderland story, the man only said:

"Will you walk a little faster?" He also added "you bitch" but since the editor will cut it out, I am merely appending it for easy deletion.

Some time later they came to a house and the men brought Elizabeth into a kitchen where there were three women. They immediately, she said, made her a proposition.

"Eh, its a fine looking little wench she is," one of the women said with a leer. "Come our way, dearie, and its fine clothes and plenty of money you shall have."

Though a modest, virginal and innocent maid, some fund of wisdom told Elizabeth unerringly what "their way" was and like any heroine, she spurned with loathing the life of sin they offered.

"Never!" she said. Whether she had the wit to compare it to a fate worse than death is unknown.

One of the women snatched up a knife and Elizabeth thought her time had come. But all the woman did was cut the laces on her stays—corset to Americans—and remove the garment. Then everybody hauled off and slapped her and cursed her and they pushed her up a flight of stairs into a "hayloft."

"I heard the lock snap on the door and I knew this was my prison. It was all dark up there, but I found a few pieces of bread and a pitcher of water that they had left."

The abductors had t a k e n her money, her cloths and her stays. But they had overlooked the little mince pie, strangely enough, and it was still clutched in Elizabeth's hot little hand as she stumbled up the stairs to her prison.

IT was well she had it, for with the little bread and water she found in the hayloft, it was all the food she had for the next four weeks!

"I never saw any of them again. They never came near me, never unlocked the door, never brought me anything to eat. I think they were just waiting for me to die."

But she refused to oblige them. On the day of her escape, she pulled loose a board nailed over the window and squeezed out through the opening. She slid down the sloping roof, catching her ear on a nail as she went, but landed safely on the ground. The rag-

ged dressing gown and handkerchief she had found in the hayloft.

"Then I walked home," she concluded.

The storm began at once. Even the superstitious people of that time were not so credulous that they could not see the large holes in Elizabeth's story.

That she could live for a month on a few pieces of bread and a tiny mince pie no bigger than a tart was highly unlikely. True, she was half-starved when she arrived home. But could she, half-starved, have walked eleven miles home in that condition? If kidnapped and knocked unconscious, how could she have walked six hours in a daze, or after? And since all she had to do to escape was pry loose a board from the window, why did she wait for four weeks to do it?

Some people asked these questions. But others worked up a fine case of hysterical righteousness over the poor dear darling and wanted to go right out and hang somebody for it—if only they could find someone to hang!

After a while Elizabeth came up with a clue. "I looked through a crack in the boards once," she said, "and I thought I saw the Hertford Coach going by."

"Hertford Road!" said a neighbor.

"I know," exclaimed a young man. "They had you at Mother Wells'!"

The name meant something to a lot of people. It was given to a decaying old house on Hertford Road which had a very bad reputation. To put matters bluntly, a red light should have been hung over the doorway.

"Wells!" said Elizabeth faintly. "I do believe I heard the name Wells or Wills spoken while I was there!"

Now they were getting somewhere. Two days later, Elizabeth was brought before an alderman in an office where she swore out a warrant of arrest for "Mother" Wells. The alderman was not sold on her story, but had no choice. He issued the warrant, remarking that he did not believe her. One of the reasons he did not believe her was connected with the torn and dirty dressing gown, which she had brought along as evidence. The alderman asked to retain it.

"It's my mother's!" Elizabeth snapped.

The alderman's eyebrows went up. "My dear child," he said, "you just told us you found it in the hayloft."

Elizabeth turned a deep red and dropped the dressing gown as though it had grown very hot.

Nevertheless, a party, armed with the warrant, set out for the Wells' house next day. In the official report of the officers who went along on that expedition, appears doubt as to her veracity.

The house was there, and it had a hayloft, but there was nothing remarkable about this, for all those houses had haylofts. The room was nothing like Elizabeth's description, nor did it have a lock on the door and its windows bore no signs of ever having been boarded up.

There were seven people in the house, all of whom became famous overnight. There was old Mrs. Wells, the owner; a girl with the name of Virtue Hall (which proves the power of mind over matter) a man named Natus and his wife; a gypsy named Mary Squires and her son and daughter, George and Lucy Squires. Natus, whose first name was Fortune, was the object of the most wonderful puns in London coffee houses, and the girl named Virtue ran him a close second.

But it was Mary Squires who took the limelight. For Elizabeth Canning went straight to her as a compass to the pole and pointed the finger of accusation at her.

"There is the woman who beat and robbed me."

Mary Squires had been smoking a pipe at the fire, her features concealed by a black bonnet. She rose up and turned, now, removing the bonnet and showing a face that might have terrified a timid soul. It was a face horribly scarred by scrofula. Worse yet it was adorned with a huge nose that

would have abashed Cyrano himself, and completed with a lower lip that would have made a Ubangi turn green with jealousy. "Longer than a child's arm," was a witness' description.

THIS apparition faced Elizabeth Canning with flashing eyes. "Look at me!" she demanded. "Look well, for once having laid eyes upon this face you are most unapt to forget it. Can you say I robbed you? I never saw you before in all my life. Think, think well before you swear my life away! When was it you say I robbed you?"

"It was New Year's Day," Elizabeth Canning replied.

"On New Year's Day I was a hundred and twenty miles distant from here!"

"My mother speaks the truth!" said George Squires. "We were at Abbotsbury on New Year's Day."

"And," said Fortune Natus, "if this girl says she was held prisoner in the hayloft she lies, for my good wife and I have been sleeping there every night for the last twelve weeks."

"They are lying!" Elizabeth said wildly. Then she pointed at Lucy Squires and Virtue Hall and cried. "They were there when *she* robbed me and they laughed and struck me!"

"May God forgive you," said Virtue Hall. "On my life I swear you have never set foot in this house before this day."

The upshot of this was that all seven were arrested and carted off and tossed into the clink. Not that there was a general acceptance of Elizabeth's story. The old gypsy woman had hit the nail on the head when she said to Elizabeth that she was not apt to forget such a face, having seen it once. Yet in telling her story, Elizabeth had never mentioned such a gross gargoyle. She had merely said that "a woman" had cut her stays and so forth. How could she have overlooked such clues as that nose and lower lip?

Still, the indignation over her mistreatment was, at this point, loud enough to carry the day. With the seven in gaol, Elizabeth appeared before a justice of the peace, who happened to be Henry Fielding, a famous writer, and gave her story. Fielding, a soft-hearted man and an easy conquest for a tale of woe, was converted and became a staunch Canningite. He expedited matters and Mary Squires came to trial as thief and abductor, with Susannah Wells as her accomplice.

And now that the affair was beginning to have a grim turn, Virtue Hall began to have fears for her own handsome neck. She took the easy way out in panic, turned on her friends and backed up Elizabeth's story, thereby practically condemning Mary Squires. It is worth recording here, that she had another change of heart later and repudiated her evidence, but it was too late.

Mary Squires' attempts to prove her own innocence were feeble and could not stand up against the mass hysteria of the more numerous Canningites. She brought witnesses to testify that she was in Abbotsbury on New Year's Day, but the jury brushed their testimony aside.

"It is the sentence of this court that you, Mary Squires, having been convicted of stealing one pair of stays, value ten shillings, from Elizabeth Canning, be hanged by the neck until you are dead. And that you, Susannah Wells as her accomplice, be branded on the hand with the letter T."

The branding was done on the spot, the sheriff having thoughtfully heated the iron beforehand, to the great enjoyment of the crowd in the courtroom. They were disappointed in the matter of the hanging, however, which was not yet to be.

For the Lord Mayor of London, Sir Crispe Gascoyne, did not believe Elizabeth Canning's story, and he was a man of crisp Gascoyne action. He boiled with rage at "the farce of that trial." He petitioned the King for a postponement of the hanging, which

was granted, and then he brought up so much evidence that threw doubt on Elizabeth's story that the King finally granted a full pardon to Mary Squires.

This threw the Canningites into hydrophobic frenzy. Their heroine had been insulted and justice betrayed. The controversy raged and the battle spread. The Canningites took up collections to investigate evidence and protect Elizabeth and on the other side the Egyptians raised money and hired private investigators to collect evidence to prove Elizabeth was a liar and Mary Squires was telling the truth. Henry Fielding wrote about it, Sir Gascoyne wrote about it and over in France, even Voltaire wrote about the strange Canning case.

Fifteen months after Elizabeth's supposed abduction, she was arrested and went on trial for perjury.

"Think of it, gentlemen," the King's attorney said. "We are asked to believe that the man who abducted Elizabeth Canning stole her money, stole her clothes, but spared her mince pie!"

The Canning trial ranks as one of the most remarkable in English jurisprudence. It ran far longer than nearly all trials of that period—seven days. A mob of Canningites and Egyptians filled the room and overflowed on the streets outside, avid for news.

ELIZABETH appeared calm and confident throughout; she was well dressed and well fed, in sharp contrast to Mary Squires. The unfortunate old gypsy, despite her pardon, had been kept in gaol all these months and she was now weak and sick. The packed mass of humanity in the room made it chokingly hot and smelly and the old woman fainted a few times and had to be revived before the trial could go on.

The investigators hired by the Egyptians had done their work well. Thirty-six witnesses paraded to the witness box and swore that they had personally seen or spoken to the Squires family in various parts of England, anywhere but in Enfield on Hertford Road. Since Lucy Squires was a pretty girl, despite her mother, there were numerous young men who remembered her very well throughout the country.

Then the Canningites got in their licks. Twenty-six witnesses got up to swear that the Squires were at the Wells house on New Year's Day. With the jury properly befuddled, the King's attorney got down to work with the first bit of anything resembling scientific evidence.

He pointed out that not far from the window in the hayloft where Elizabeth was supposed to have languished, was a pond. Here farmers watered their stock and when the pond was frozen, as it probably was in January, the village boys and girls came to skate. Surely Elizabeth Canning could have heard the sound of their merry voices? Had it never once occurred to her to cry out to them for succor?

Whether it was science or the fact that the Egyptians had ten more witnesses that swayed the jury is unknown. But the verdict was clear enough.

"We find the prisoner, Elizabeth Canning, guilty of perjury."

The judges had a moment of disagreement. Then the sentence came through:

"Transportation for seven years to His Majesty's plantations in America."

And so Elizabeth Canning passed out of England and took her secret with her. And behind her the controversy raged for a hundred years. Henry Fielding supported her and continued to do so all his life. Nor did the battle end with the generation that lived through it. Collectors of famous crimes joined forces. Andrew Lang went along with Fielding. Austin Dobson and Arthur Machen were loudly Egyptian. And Edmund Pearson, though officially taking no sides, tells the story of Elizabeth Canning

with tongue making such a large lump in his cheek that there is no doubt which side he is on.

It might be pleasant to report that Elizabeth Canning divulged, at long last, the true story of her adventure and cleared up the mystery; that, if she were guilty of perjury, she suffered for her near-swearing away of an innocent life and repented. But alas, there is no justice.

Elizabeth Canning crossed the Atlantic to His Majesty's plantations and settled in Wethersfield, Connecticut. She married John Treat and thereby did very well for herself, for his great-uncle, Robert Treat, was Governor of Connecticut. She had four children. Her eldest son, Joseph Canning Treat, served with the American forces in the Revolution against His Majesty. He was, apparently, the only one of her offspring with the Canning in his name and since he dropped it upon reaching maturity, it died with him. The Treat family continued prominent and distinguished in New England, but the Canning part of the family tree was henceforth ignored.

Elizabeth died in Wethersfield in June, 1773, at the age of 38. She died with her lips still sealed.

Reports of her death caused a flurry of interest and speculation once more in London and the papers revived the old case and re-hashed for the thousandth time all the old stories and arguments.

Where was Elizabeth Canning actually for the four weeks that she was missing? That she was abducted or held prisoner and rather badly treated seems very likely, judging from her condition when she arrived home. But that she lived for a month on a tiny pie and a few pieces of bread is extremely unlikely, to understate it. All sorts of theories have been advanced, that she met a secret lover, that she embarked upon an adventure she could not explain to her mother, so made up the fantastic story of abduction to cover herself and then picked the likeliest scapegoats as victims to bolster her tale. Perhaps her lover turned upon her and robbed her and abused her after he tired of her, perhaps almost anything.

Her own story is not impressive. First she said the men robbed her. If their motive was robbery, why abduct her? If their motive was to entice her into the life of sin at Mother Wells, why keep her after she had refused? Her presence did them no good and was a danger to them.

And no one had been able to explain how she could live a month on so little food and then walk so far home on a bitter winter night.

The case becomes simple enough if one accepts the idea that Elizabeth Canning was a perverted little liar who did not hesitate to swear away an innocent life to back up her own fabrication. Such cases are far from uncommon. And many a pschologically minded reader will shudder at the memory of the gentle lips and childish prattle which has so often talked a rope around an innocent neck.

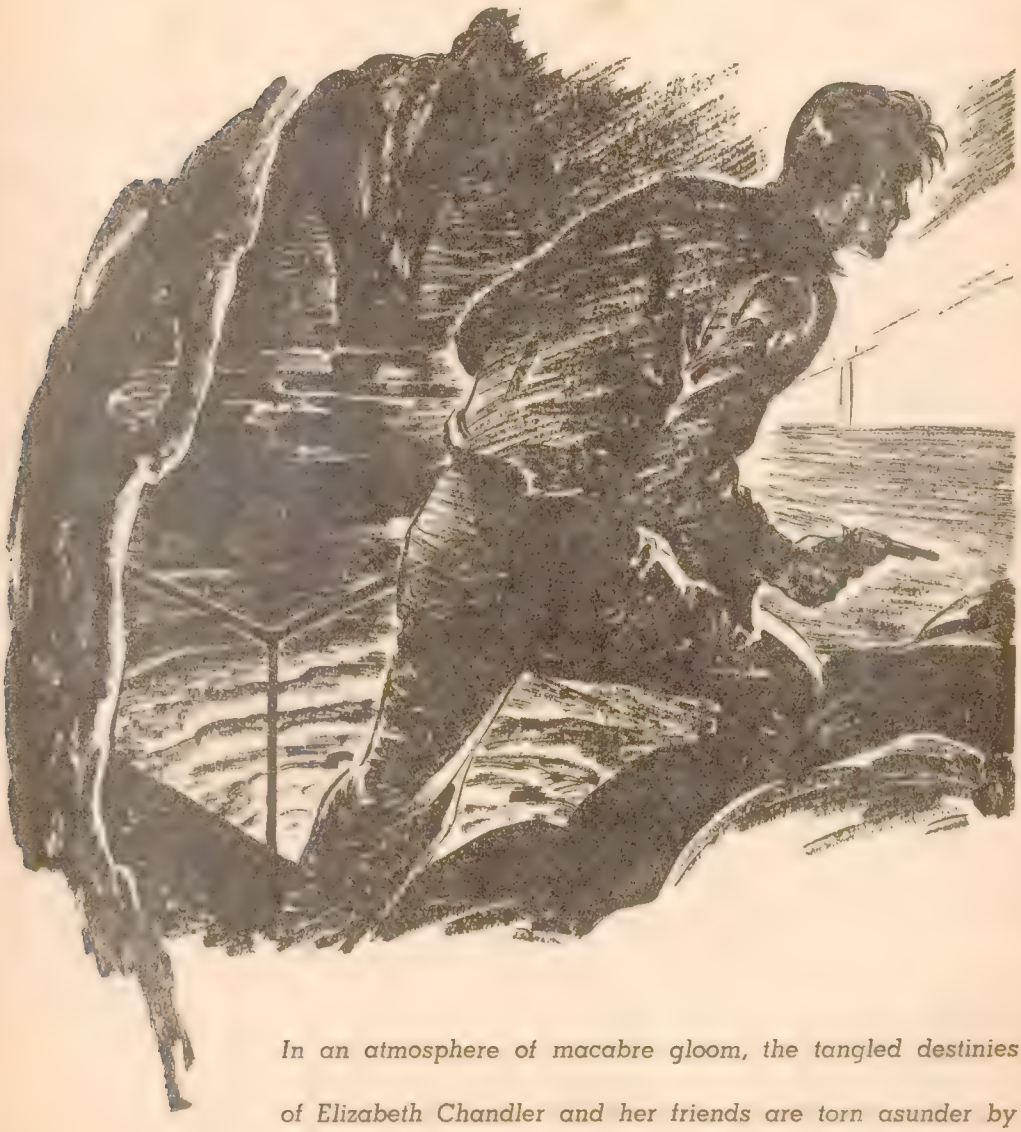
COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE VANISHED SUITOR

Another Amazing True Crime Story by LEO MARR

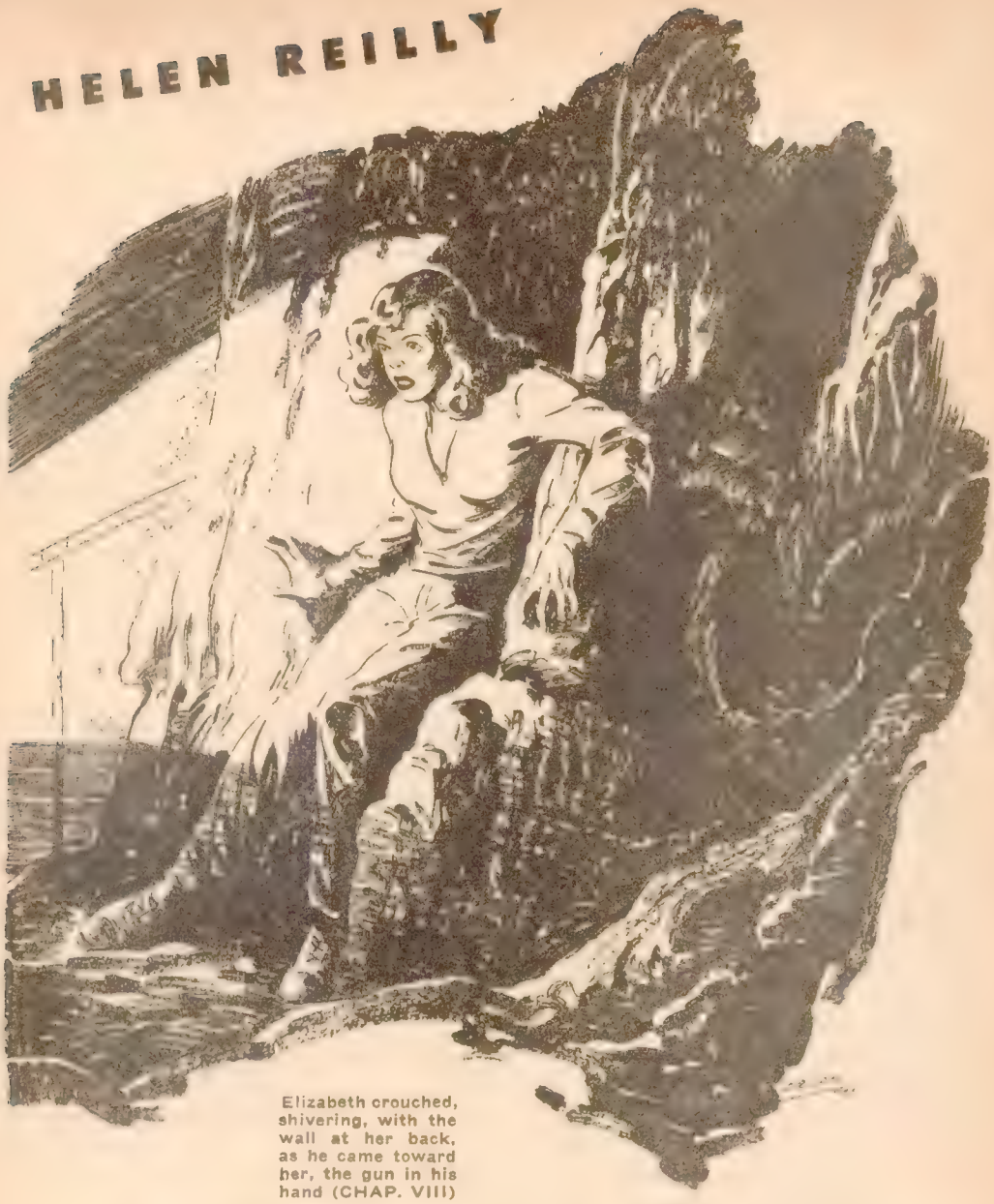
DARK EXIT

a novelet by



In an atmosphere of macabre gloom, the tangled destinies of Elizabeth Chandler and her friends are torn asunder by a hidden murderer who rises from the shadow of the past!

HELEN REILLY



Elizabeth crouched, shivering, with the wall at her back, as he came toward her, the gun in his hand (CHAP. VIII)

CHAPTER I

"TIRED, Crilly?"

"Not a bit. Are you?"

"No. Isn't it lovely here?"

"Quite a place."

The sun shone. There was no wind. Little opalescent clouds sailed the horizon. It was half-past four on the afternoon of May the twelfth. The sun was warm on the flagged terrace of the Inn. But not hot. It was spring. A new year, a new life.

Elizabeth swirled the milk in her glass contentedly and thought about Jay. He was nice to think about. She felt good.

On the other side of the table Crilly smoked somnolently in a deep chair, her long body relaxed. Crilly was top fashion designer at Saverin Inc. Eliza-

beth was one of their illustrators. The two girls, on vacation, were on the first leg of a leisurely motor trip through upstate New York. They had arrived at Coxsackie an hour earlier, and had the Inn practically to themselves, for there weren't more than half a dozen other guests. On the following day, after a visit to the Persephone Caverns, a mile to the east, they were going on to Canada. That was the plan.

They talked desultorily of how wonderful it was to do nothing.

"No men," Crilly said.

"And no buyers."

"And no dress forms, no priorities, no special purchases, nothing to try on." Crilly sat sharply erect. "Will you look!"

An immense yellow convertible was mounting the driveway through trees. The car was Frederick Newell's, of Newell's Woolens, ordinary habitat the East Fifties. Fred was the man Crilly was going to marry. He was at the wheel. Jay Sergeant lounged beside him. Jay was Crilly's cousin. He and Elizabeth were engaged.

The girls had said good-by to the two men the day before for a period of three weeks. And here they were.

"Now what do you suppose—" There was color in Crilly's thin cheeks. Her fine head was at an angle. She was annoyed.

THE car stopped and the two men got out and mounted the steps. Crilly's annoyance vanished at Fred Newell's volcanic advance. He was all arms and legs, very thin and very tall, with a small naked head and an enormous amount of teeth. She raised a smiling face to his beam, his kiss.

Jay contented himself with less. He wasn't demonstrative.

"Glad to see me?"

He touched Elizabeth's shoulder lightly, dropped into a chair beside her. His sherry-brown eyes were warm.

The warmth frightened Elizabeth a little. It always did when they had been separated for a while. Could she meet, match it? Of course she could, in time. That was one of the things that would grow. The foundation was there.

Jay was physically attractive. She liked him thoroughly. She respected him. Their minds marched in tune on all the subjects that really mattered. It was simply that she hadn't anticipated his emotional depth. Outwardly he was a cool person, balanced, controlled, very civilized. To have him care so much had been a surprise.

Jay explained their arrival. He had to see a client in Albany. Fred had volunteered to drive him. Coxsackie was on the way.

"We thought we'd stop in and see how you two were behaving yourselves. . . . Waiter!" He raised a hand.

It didn't occur to Elizabeth until they were upstairs dressing an hour later to wonder how Jay and Fred knew she and Crilly were at Coxsackie. They had started out without any definite itinerary. Crilly had chosen 9W at random, going across the George Washington bridge.

"You're always saying how wonderful the Mohawk Valley is. Let's try it."

Elizabeth had had no objection. Her connection with the valley had been severed. Mr. and Mrs. Gryce were dead, Hank Gryce was in Japan with the Occupation Forces and Anthony—Anthony was married and lived in Washington. Dead past, done with. A memory. No more, ever.

She reached into her dressing case for earrings, fastened them on, and called to Crilly through the door which was open between their rooms:

"How do you suppose Jay and Fred knew where to find us?"

Crilly was insinuating her length into cinnamon-colored crepe. The low sun was behind her. Her shadow stood still on the wall.

"How—" The skirt flattened. Her head emerged. "Oh, I called Jay last night after you were in bed. I forgot my electric light bill."

Elizabeth frowned at her reflection in the mirror. She had lain awake for hours last night, hadn't heard Crilly

In front of her a long, dark shape was swinging and twisting slowly (CHAPTER VI)

stir. A pinprick. Stupid. It remained with her. They went downstairs.

Lamplight, flowers, the two men waiting in the hall. Jay handsome, compact, quiet, smiling into her eyes. They had cocktails in the small dim bar, went in to dinner.

The subject of the Gryces came up with the fish and an excellent hock Jay had chosen. Fred exclaiming at the fish, "Suicidal, so far inland. Ptomaine. My stomach. How can you?" Crilly laughed and squeezed lemon. Pouring pale gold coldness into her glass, Jay said, "This is an old stamping ground of yours, isn't it, Elizabeth?"

"Yes."

Keep it quiet, easy. Don't accelerate. The reminder was still necessary.

"Before the Gryces died, Mr. and Mrs. Gryce, I spent my summers at their place down the valley. My aunt was a friend of theirs. Hank and Anthony and I used to come over here on Saturday night to dance when the caves were open."

She sipped wine, not tasting it. Ridiculous enchanting dances, she thought, remembering. All sorts of people visited the caverns, and watching them had been a delight. She and Anthony and Hank had come over almost every Saturday night for years.

Hank had taught her to dance on the shiny oak floor and they drank beer and watched the crowd and ate apple strudel and cheese cake.

THE Inn hadn't changed. There were the same hand-blocked curtains looped back from the deep narrow windows over heavy walnut settles, the same big fireplace with its pink and white and blue Dutch tiles, the same sheen of pewter and flash of gay pottery on the walnut dresser where they used to spread buffet suppers.

And beyond the walls there was the same great upward roll of hill and squares of pasture tilting to the edge of clouds, and the road winding south to the Gryce farm.

The place was closed now. Mr. and Mrs. Gryce were gone and the boys were far away. A book one had read, a play one had seen, not real any more.

Elizabeth turned to Jay and began to talk about the caverns.

"They're one of the Seven Wonders of the world."

"No, you are. I like that dress, my pet."

She patted his hand. "You should. It's Crilly's latest."

In the middle of dinner it happened, unbelievably. What you expected and what you got were two different things. Dace and Anthony and Hank walked into the room.

Elizabeth was dancing with Jay at the time and it was through moving heads and shoulders that she caught sight of Dace's pale childish face in the doorway, with Hank beside her, and Anthony behind. Anthony. She was glad of that preliminary glimpse. The tight breathlessness constricting her lungs had gone when she returned to the table and found Anthony and the others talking to Fred Newell and Crilly.

"Look what we have for you," Crilly said. "Your old friends and near relations. Say hello nicely, Elizabeth."

Everyone said hello at once and a waiter put another table against theirs and Elizabeth found herself between Jay and Hank. And Hank was as he always had been, big and solid and reassuring, and pleasantly ugly and incredibly comfortable to be with as he said:

"I call this prescience, young woman. We nearly weren't coming. Tell all, at once. What have you been doing with yourself?"

She told him about her job with Saverin, and where she lived. "Crilly and I share an apartment. . . ." Jay's ring was sharp against pressing palms in her lap. She loosened her hands, extended the left one on the cloth. "Jay and I—"

Anthony stopped what he was saying to Crilly and looked across at the ring, and then at Elizabeth's face. So did Hank. They both congratulated Jay. They didn't—she knew them so well—appear to care particularly for Jay,

which was simply natural male jealousy.

Hank said, "Well, well, you've grown up, Kid," and she said, "It's a regrettable habit people have," and he laughed, his hazel eyes alight under crooked brows.

Yes, Hank was just the same. But nothing else was.

The rest of the evening had an unreal quality that was like a very clear dream. Dancing with Anthony, quietly—you couldn't refuse when he asked you. The two of them matching their steps without effort, the feel of his arm around her, dancing with him out through a doorway onto the terrace.

She hadn't meant to do that. She was frightened. He seemed to feel her withdrawal. He released her and said harshly out of a pause:

"I've lost you for good, haven't I Elizabeth?"

She didn't answer. She was cold and her throat was tight. After that he spoke of Dace, distantly visible and lovely, folds of her pale blue dress spilling over the edge of her chair.

He said in calm matter-of-fact tones: "I suppose you've seen how it is with us. We were all washed up six months after we were married. She won't give me a divorce. She likes Washington. She'll hang on until something better than an under secretary comes along, and meanwhile enjoy life."

DACE had changed him shockingly. He was white and thin, and edged nerves showed in his voice and eyes and in his gestures. The change in him hurt Elizabeth. She didn't know what to say, could hardly trust herself to speak. She asked him about his work and he warmed a little talking of it, and they sat in Crilly's car and smoked a cigarette, and then went back inside again, Anthony reluctantly, and only when Hank appeared, saying it was his turn for a dance.

Elizabeth was glad when the night shot through with sorrow and strangeness ended. Only it wasn't an end. Breaking up, Crilly mentioned their tour of the caverns the following day, and Dace said:

"Odd, but I've been up here for years and I've never been down. I'd rather like a peek. Perhaps I'll join you."

Dace did. . . .

"All those with blue tickets, this way. The ladies will please take light coats. The temperature down there is fifty degrees and under. . . All those with blue tickets—"

The uniformed guard at the little wicket gate sang his accustomed song. A party returning from a trip through the caverns foamed past at the southern end of the lobby. Elizabeth moved with the others toward the wicket.

She had hoped against hope that none of the Gryces would come. But all three of them were there. Dace had arrived first, then Hank had strolled in, and then Anthony. Because of Anthony's being there she had that cold peculiar feeling of tightness and all her senses were alive and alert, which was why every detail was printed indelibly on her mind.

Their tour began at eleven o'clock. Entrance to the elevators that carried you down was through the Dutch farmhouse in which the shaft was sunk, and that was exactly as it had been when the Iroquois had still roamed the valley. From the lounge you went into the old dairy. Instead of milk pans and cheese and butter churns, the modern elevator was waiting. The Persephone caverns had been opened to the public two years before the war and offered the last word in comfort.

The doors of the elevators closed and you sank smoothly through a hole in the earth's crust that went down almost three hundred feet. The guide told you that, told you that it was perfectly safe, and that if the electricity should fail there were ladders at each landing of the adjacent staircase, hewn out of solid rock.

The elevator stopped finally and you got out of it and stepped into another world, a world that extended for miles, no one knew quite how far. The immensity of that subterranean vastness, the silence, and the slow almost imperceptible

tible drip of water were what impressed themselves first. There seemed to be no limit to that strange, mysterious, ancient underworld.

Elizabeth had had glimpses of it before, but Crilly and Jay and Fred Newell hadn't, and the three of them looked vacant, stunned, for an instant, their sophistication stripped away by the impact.

Hank Gryce was watching them, too, from under peaked eyebrows and the brim of his naval officer's cap, and smiling faintly. He and Anthony knew the caves by heart, knew them much better than Elizabeth did.

They were in a smallish entrance chamber with bulging rocky walls from which corridors in stone branched off at intervals in dimness. The air was cold. Water coated most of the rounded surfaces and made them gleam and pulse in and out a little so that they seemed to be moving in the fantastic shadows.

The thing that was down there wasn't evil. But it took you by the throat with the grip of the unknown, the unknowable.

"The caverns are the result of more than a million years of steady persistent action by underground streams. A million years—"

The guide paused to let that sink in.

CHAPTER II

ANTHONY'S wife was the first to move. So far, Elizabeth had managed not to think about her, look at her. She did then. Dace's facile red mouth twisted at the corners with impatience.

"Let's get on with it," she said, her voice sharp.

A widower, who with his two little boys and his sister completed their party, gave her a surprised gentle stare. The guide was taken aback. He dropped three paragraphs out of his usual monologue, recovered himself, and continued with dignity:

"If you will follow me? We are now about to enter the cave of Merlin where the first of the stalagmites and stalactites appear."

They went through a great wedge-shaped opening into a larger chamber, its farther end concealed by shadows. Water dripped from above, gurgled softly from a concealed stream. Light fell sparsely on a thousand cone-shaped icicles descending from above, rising from below, in glittering creams and ivories, violets and rose madder and topaz, eternal ice that would never melt.

An approximation of an angel with a flaming sword in bronze calcite guarded the entrance to the maze beyond. A maze it was, full of strange shapes, where the walls advanced and retreated. A brick walk traversed the middle of it. There were iron railings on either side. Below the rails there were pits and crevices, opening blackly in the tumbled rocky floor.

"Careful, everyone," the guide admonished. "That water is three hundred feet down in places, and very wet."

A rehearsed pause. Laughter spattered dutifully from the widower and his sister, and the two little boys giggled immoderately in a frenzy of excitement. The way narrowed then and they fell into pairs in the chill gloom.

Elizabeth found Anthony beside her. The rock ceiling was low in spots, and he had to bend his tall, fair head. They were going farther into the earth. The brick path sloped downward at an incline. She concentrated rather more than was necessary on keeping her footing.

Behind them the widower's sister, who turned out to be a Miss Boone, was saying to Hank:

"It's—impressive. No, that's not what I mean, but—"

In front Dace's scarlet coat swung in a wide arc.

Elizabeth saw and heard these things but in spite of it found herself completely and frighteningly alone with Anthony, a new and unhappy Anthony. She felt his presence, the sound of his foot-

prints, his breathing, all through her body. She tried to think of something to say and couldn't. Rounding a curve she slipped, and his arm shot out and saved her from falling.

She stood erect quickly. "It's—all right. It was just that wet place."

Dace whirled around in the dimness. "Hard to keep your footing, is it, Elizabeth?" she said with swift, unmistakable malice. "I'd be careful if I were you."

Elizabeth's side stung where Anthony had held her, but she answered serenely, "I'm being quite careful."

She was used to Dace now. Dace's arrogant little blows glanced off without leaving a mark. You learned, Elizabeth had discovered, to accept things, or at least to carry yourself as though you did. You never showed by a word or a look what was inside of you, what had been there for so long.

The huddle of people, mere dots in the immensity, moved on through that strange underground world putting the elevator farther and farther behind them. They went over the vaulting arch of a huge natural bridge and into chamber after chamber and gallery after gallery in semi-twilight.

THEY looked at Jupiter's Couch and the bay of Naples upside down, at Vulcan's Smithy and at Niagara in frozen flowstone, at a tiny village in brown perched on the edge of a miniature cliff, each house complete, and at a gigantic pine forest, the wind forever caught in wide slanting branches of stone.

And the guide talked, and Fred Newell peered, gangling and weedy, and Crilly exclaimed, and the widower and Miss Boone laughed dutifully in the proper places, and the grouping shifted, but always Anthony was near Elizabeth. Until almost at the end when they entered Pluto's Lair where the underground lakes began.

Just before that Anthony left her. Hank called to him to inspect some alteration or other and he gave her arm a light pressure and walked on. She had forgotten Jay. She thought of him with a little pang, and stood still and looked around.

Jay was strolling along in the rear, smoking a forbidden cigarette and picking his steps. He looked different, not his usual debonair cheerful self, against the drop curtain of shadows. His handsome face with its sharply chiseled features was white in the faint light, and his sherry-brown eyes were somnolent, fixed.

He said in a bored tone, rubbing out his cigarette:

"This isn't my idea of a rousing good time, sweet. I never did like travelogues, even in the movies. And it's cold. I hope you're dressed warmly enough. I'm a stranger here myself. Does it go on much longer?"

Elizabeth laughed at his expression of tolerant woe.

"Not much," she told him. "Just the underground lakes in a gondola."

Poor Jay, she reflected. New York was his habitat. He was as much out of place in rural surroundings as a deer would be in a hotel lobby. Nature in the raw didn't suit him. Set him down in any city in the world and he would find his way about, but here he looked lost and, yes—and it was odd because he was completely fearless—nervous and ill at ease.

Crilly heard his grumble. "Do you good, Jay," she called back, in her crisp voice. "Nobody should miss it. . . . Oh, look at that—look at it! It's big enough for a regatta."

Miss Boone said, "Ah," and the eyes of the two little boys were round with astonishment.

Ahead of them the great inner cave of the lakes had opened up.

Afterward, Elizabeth tried to put that place into words, and failed.

They were in a vast amphitheatre that defeated the eye with its empty immensity. On the left the wide brick path along which they were proceeding hugged walls hung with grottos and arches that ran up to an invisible roof in shadow. Beyond the platform, in front

of it, water stretched in a black motionless sheet to cliffs on the opposite side, rising sheerly into veiling gloom.

It was difficult to tell that there was water there at first. The reflections were so perfect that the subterranean Valhalla appeared to go down and down into bottomless infinity. The only sound was the faint drip, gentle and inexorable, ticking off time where time in the ordinary sense didn't exist.

No one spoke at first, and then the guide began to talk. He described the difficulty of the engineers in reaching and partially clearing the great inner caves, the months of work, the clinging mud, the bones of millions of bats, the darkness and wet.

HE said that before they embarked on the underground lake he was going to turn off the lights in order to give them an idea of what the darkness really was like.

"After that if you will kindly remain as you are and look in that direction"—he waved toward the inner end of the cavern where a jagged opening hung low over the still water—"you will see dawn break across the lakes, a very beautiful spectacle arranged by a master technician. We shall then proceed to the boats and explore the lakes themselves. Everyone ready?"

"You're sure it's safe?" Miss Boone asked nervously.

The guide assured her it was. No one else said anything. The lights went out.

Elizabeth watched the guide's hand touch a small metal box fastened to the railing near the flight of steps at the bottom of which the boats were moored. Instantly everything vanished. Dace's red coat and Anthony's smooth fair head and Crilly's intent, interested face with its wide mouth, were wiped out, and blackness descended.

It wasn't blackness in the ordinary sense. There was no alleviation of it. It was absolute, complete, a primordial darkness that filled your ears and eyes and got down inside you. You had to exert all your force to withstand its subtle attempt to draw you into its own essence of emptiness and silence and negation.

The caverns came alive in the thick velvety darkness. The drip of water was louder, and there were tiny whisperings and rustlings that didn't disturb the crushing weight that was part of it.

Miss Boone coughed, and someone whispered something, and the silence folded in again.

Elizabeth thought suddenly, "I can't stand it any more—it's stifling me," and put a hand to her throat. Her hand stopped in midair.

There was a sharp crack, then an explosion.

The rolling, roaring echoes were so loud that it was impossible to think. They banged splittingly against walls of rock. The end of the world seemed to have come. Before the echoes began to recede, while they were at their height, something struck Elizabeth's ankle, sharply. She was only vaguely aware of the pain, in the uproar and tumult.

There was a moment of paralyzed silence when no one spoke and no one did anything. Then one of the little boys began to cry, and voices were raised hysterically, and the guide, fighting for breath, groped for the switch and pressed it.

The lights came on. The wet platform, the shadows, the black glass of the lake in dimness—at first nothing seemed to be wrong. Then they saw. Concentric circles were widening and widening on the dark water below.

Dace was nowhere in sight. And something had fallen into the underground lake.

Pandemonium in nightmare. It was then that the little boy hiccoughed and Miss Boone gave a long, thin scream. The widower shouted, and Hank's voice was raised and Crilly's and Fred Newell's. The guide, his face green and pinched, tried to stop the torrent of cries, the milling around, the exclamations broken off short, the questions.

"If you'll all remain where you are." he shouted, and pressed buttons, and

was at a telephone beyond a spur of rock.

A second guide who had been in one of the upper galleries with another party appeared.

A lot of things happened at once.

Their guide and Anthony and Hank and Jay were on the stairs, cut in solid rock, from the top of which Dace had fallen, were going down the crude steps. Rope was produced from somewhere, a great coil of it.

Someone, the new guide, said: "I don't think there's much hope, but—"

WHITE faces, blind eyes, the two little boys crying, Crilly and Miss Boone bending over them. Elizabeth clung to the railing.

There were men in the water. One was Anthony, one was their guide. The rope was being tied to a post that supported the railing by the new guide and Fred Newell.

The guide in the lake shouted, "Stay where you are, Jimmy!" and dived again.

They found Dace. Men were pulling at the rope with all their strength, feet braced. Coils of it gathered on the red bricks of the walk behind them. Arms were stretched out and the pitiful burden was lifted and Dace was put down, gently.

She lay there at their feet, her red coat soaked dark, little runnels of water spouting from her sodden clothes, her hair and dress, her red alligator pumps. Her eyes were open. There was no sight in them.

Miss Boone sobbed gaspingly and Crilly said harshly, "What about artificial respiration? Maybe—"

Hank and Anthony and the guide were down on their knees. Anthony's back was turned. Elizabeth was glad she couldn't see his face. Presently Hank got to his feet. His voice was quiet, matter of fact, but he was white, grim, tight-lipped.

He said, "It's no use, old man," and laid a hand on Anthony's shoulder and went on talking.

Dace was dead. She hadn't fallen down the staircase by accident. She had gone over it in a leap. She had been shot. The redness on the rocks wasn't dye.

Elizabeth turned stumblingly away—and saw it. The gun was lying on the platform within an inch or two of where she had been standing when the lights went off. It was the gun, or pistol, or revolver, flung toward the water, that her ankle had stopped.

The two little boys kept on crying. Miss Boone sobbed. Crilly said sharply, "But we can't stay here. You can't keep these children here, anyhow. Let their aunt take them away."

"I'm sorry, miss." More officials, running. "No." A sharp order came from an elderly man with a beard. "No one must move until the police get here. They're on the way. They won't be long."

The police. Elizabeth was a little apart from the others. She moistened dry lips. Dace had been killed by a bullet that had been accurately aimed and fired under cover of the blanketing darkness by someone in that group of ten people.

Coldness from the cornucopia of flowstone against which she leaned spread all through her. Miss Boone hadn't killed Dace, nor had the poor harassed widower, nor either of the two little boys. That left—she counted desperately—Crilly, her best friend, Fred Newell, the man to whom Crilly was about to be married, Jay, to whom she herself was engaged, and Hank and Anthony, with whom she had grown up. Anthony who—

Elizabeth closed her eyes. She opened them suddenly.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, the boys are marching—the sound was unmistakable. The police were entering the cavern.

Terror blotted out every other emotion in Elizabeth. The gun with which Dace had been shot was in her hand, concealed in the folds of her aquamarine coat. And they were all going to be searched. The lights blazed now, a small pool in darkness, pinning her relentlessly to the tilted mass of flowstone so that she

couldn't move.

A policeman was advancing on her. The gun that had killed Dace—Oh, she had no doubt about it!—dug into her side, hard and cold and evil. The trooper paused in front of her.

"Miss?"

"Chandler, Elizabeth Chandler."

"If you'd just step over here, Miss Chandler?"

"Yes." Elizabeth followed him into even fuller light.

CHAPTER III

"NO gun, Bill?"

"No gun, Lieutenant," the trooper answered. "We searched them all, give them a good going over. We searched the platform, the whole place. Thrown into the water, most like."

"Um, yes."

The two state policemen were in the hall of the farmhouse above the caverns. Lieutenant Vroonan was in charge. Vroonan was a stout, thick-set man in his forties, with bow legs, powerful shoulders, a mild wooden expression and a dark skin, together with certain instincts that he had inherited from an Indian grandmother. His ancestors, Indian, Dutch, and English, had roamed the Mohawk valley when Lord Jeffrey Amherst was in swaddling clothes. Vroonan knew the terrain well, and was thoroughly familiar with the caves.

He had already viewed the scene of the crime, the body of the expensive and beautiful Mercedes Gryce, mown down by a bullet crashing through flesh and bone. He had talked to the guide, and had the general set-up clear.

"No gun." He caressed a square chin. "That's bad. We're going to need the gun. Channel bed down there's full of rocks and the water's deep. We'll have to drag it, maybe get a diver. . . . I'll talk to them now."

"The husband first?"

"No. We'll let him stew in his own juice for a while. Bring me that Miss Van Sant."

Elizabeth moved away from the tall white doors of the little writing room opening off the hall. She sat down hastily, was lucky she didn't fall down. The others were all there. They had been there for more than an hour. There was a trooper with them so that she hadn't been able to talk to Crilly.

She brushed hair back from a hot forehead. She had to talk to Crilly, had to ask her just one question, one single question. And she couldn't do it.

The trooper named Bill came in. "Miss Van Sant?"

When Crilly's name was called she got to her feet, tall and straight and smart, and followed the trooper out of the room, her shoulders square and flat under beautifully tailored gabardine, her huge doeskin bag under her arm. She had recovered the cool poise that was as much a part of her as her long narrow hands and feet.

"This is a frightful thing, Officer, frightful. How it could have happened?"

The door closed.

Elizabeth stirred in her flowery green chair and raised heavy eyelids. Fear weighed them down, was a live thing in her breast, a sword going through her.

Anthony was standing at the window, his back to the bright noon light, an edge of gold around his head. His face was empty, drained. Dace had been his wife and they had been unhappy together, and Dace was dead. He was like a sleepwalker.

"Anthony, Anthony, darling—you've got to wake up!" Elizabeth thought.

He wasn't looking at her, he was looking at Jay, and his white stare, without focus, got on Jay's nerves.

"For God's sake, sit down will you, Gryce?" Jay said, and Anthony said softly. "Sorry to annoy you, but I'll do as I damned well please."

The tension between them was unmistakable. Hank intervened.

"Sit down, Tony," he said gently, and Anthony did.

Then silence folded in again, except for Miss Boone and the widower who went on talking in whispers on the couch, with the sleeping boys between them.

THE sound sawed at Elizabeth's nerves. It seemed to bother Fred Newell, too. He lit a cigarette with fingers that shook. His expression was petulant, annoyed, that of a man who found the whole business excessively distasteful and simply not done. He cleared his throat raspingly.

"I'm worried about my people," he said. "They won't like this. I wonder whether it can be kept out of the papers? It's not the sort of thing one cares to be mixed up in."

"It isn't nice, is it, Newell?" Anthony's drawling voice was higher than it should have been. "Sons of our best butter and egg merchants oughtn't to be around while murder is being committed."

Fred's face went ruddy, swelled. 'I wasn't talking to you, Mr. Gryce. I was talking to my friend, Mr. Sergeant. I'll trouble you to mind your own business —or perhaps you have already been minding it."

There was venom under Fred Newell's silly-ass exterior, his Chesterfieldian elegance and haw-haw manners. Elizabeth wanted to slap him.

Hank said quietly without moving, his legs thrust out in front of him, his big quizzical face cold:

"You'd better shut up, Newell, or you'll get a poke you won't like."

"I will, will I?"

"You can count on it."

Elizabeth thought wearily, "Oh, why don't they stop? They'll be at each other's throats in a minute. What fools they are, with that trooper listening."

Crilly was the only one who could handle Fred. It was a relief when the door opened and she came back. Elizabeth glanced at her quickly, but her face was unreadable.

She said, with a moan: "You next, Miss Boone. . . . All I want in the world is a cigarette. I ask no wine."

She dropped into a chair next to Fred's and patted his arm.

"Poor lamb. It's too bad you had to get mixed up in this, and I know you're due in the city—but now that they're started it won't take long."

Jay was watching Crilly, too. "To do what?" he said. "Hang one of us? No, they electrocute in this state, don't they?"

"Jay!" Elizabeth cried, and he smiled at her contritely.

"Sorry, darling—just nerves."

That, Elizabeth reflected, wrestling with a thousand confusions, was the trouble. Jay was nervous, but why? Neither he nor Fred Newell had known Dace. They were simply bystanders who had happened to be on the scene. Yet she found herself studying Jay in a new way, a way that startled her.

In New York it had all been clear and simple. She had been in love with Anthony, and Anthony had married Dace, and that was that, and she had had no intention of declining into spinsterhood with a handful of nostalgic memories. So when Jay had asked her to marry him, for the third time, she had said yes.

Why not? She didn't love Jay, but she liked him, thoroughly, and he fitted very well into the world she and Crilly had built for themselves. Sugar and spice and everything nice. Their apartment was charming, their bank accounts comparatively plump, and they had a large and amiable circle of acquaintances of whom they saw just enough.

"Do take Jay," Crilly had urged as though he were a peach or a particular bunch of grapes in a dish she was proffering. "You'll suit each other well."

They did. There was a good brain under Jay's easy charm, he was an interesting as well as a pleasant companion, cynical without being sour, and with a light touch.

Yes, she had been happy enough before the trip started. How long ago it seemed. . . . She woke up sharply to the present. Her name was being called.

"Miss Chandler, please."

It had come, the moment she dreaded and feared. What had Crilly said? Elizabeth got up and followed the trooper from the room. . . .

NOW, Miss Chandler, a murder has been committeed—"

Elizabeth faced Vroonan across the desk in the little office at the end of the corridor.

He thought, "Pretty girl. What eyes. She's scared. She knows something."

Elizabeth thought, "He's clever. He'll get it out of me. He won't! I'm not going to tell. Let them find out for themselves, if they can."

"Begin at the beginning, Miss Chandler. And please stick to the truth. It will save time and trouble for everyone, yourself included."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

She gave a clear concise account of their trip, starting with their departure from New York. Crilly, she said, was going to be married shortly and she herself was due for a vacation, so they had decided to spend a quiet leisurely two weeks traveling.

They had left the city at ten o'clock on the morning of the previous day and had arrived at Coxsackie, where they were going to stay the night, on the previous afternoon. They had been joined there by Jay and Fred Newell several hours later.

"Did you expect the two men to follow you, Miss Chandler?"

What had Crilly said, Elizabeth wondered? She had no way of knowing. Better stick to the truth as long as possible.

"No, Lieutenant—but we weren't surprised." Yet she had been, until Jay had explained. And there was still the question of how Jay and Fred had known where she and Crilly were. She gave the explanation Jay had given. "Mr. Sergeant's a member of an advertising agency—Stark and Copp—and he had to see a client in Albany, so he and Fred Newell thought they'd join us last night and go on to Albany later today."

"Mr. Newell is also one of Mr. Sergeant's clients?"

"Oh yes, his star client," Elizabeth said. "Fred's father is Newell's Woolens."

"So that Mr. Sergeant would be anxious to oblige Mr. Newell's son?" Vroonan asked. "I mean, it might have been Mr. Newell who insisted on coming to Coxsackie?"

Elizabeth looked her bewilderment. She couldn't see where this was leading.

The Lieutenant didn't tell her, but Miss Boone had given him some interesting scraps and fragments.

By Mr. Newell to the murdered Mercedes Gryce, in the hall of grottos in the middle of the underground trip, "It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Gryce. I enjoyed our last meeting. We ought to see more of each other."

By Miss Van Sant, in a commanding tone from a short distance away, "Frederick, come over here. I want you to look at this stalacite."

Fred Newell was a very rich young man, Crilly Van Sant was an ambitious dame, and the dead woman had been beautiful. Bop your rival, the impediment to a rich marriage, off in a choice spot.

"From what I can gather, Miss Chandler, the stop here at Coxsackie was Miss Van Sant's idea."

Elizabeth frowned. "I suppose it was. You see, Crilly's heard me talk about this country a lot. I used to stay at the Gryce farm when I was younger, when Mr. and Mrs. Gryce were alive."

"Did you expect to meet the Gryces here?"

"No," Elizabeth said. "I didn't know Hank was back from Japan, and Anthony lives in Washington."

Vroonan noted that down, and she thought "There's nothing you can say that is safe—nothing."

The Lieutenant was staring at her hard, and his face was no longer pleasant.

"Look, Miss Chandler," he said slowly, "I know these people are your friends, and that you don't want to implicate anyone. But one of your party shot Mer-

cedes Gryce, with a gun. The gun hasn't been found. You've all been searched. It isn't on any of you, it isn't on the platform. It was probably thrown into the underground lake. That's being dragged now. Did you, before the shot was fired, after it was fired, see a gun, near anybody, in anybody's hand?"

THIS was it. Elizabeth forced herself not to move, to keep on looking at the Lieutenant. Because she had seen a gun the day before. There was no proof that the gun that had shot Dace was the gun she had seen. It might well be where it had been, where it belonged. Where it was perfectly natural—or natural enough. Until she found out—

"No, Lieutenant." She shook her head, horribly aware of the white tightness in her, of her shadowed eyes, her sick fear. She was evidently doing better than she thought.

The Lieutenant relaxed. "Okay, Miss Chandler," he said pleasantly. "That'll be all, for now."

She stood up. Two or three minutes alone was all she needed. Jay and Fred Newell, Anthony and Hank, had yet to be questioned, and Crilly was with them in the writing room.

She looked appealingly at the man behind the desk.

"Could I—would it be all right if I went outside for a little while, Lieutenant? I've got rather a headache."

"Certainly, Miss Chandler. Over there." Vroonan opened the side door for her.

Sunlight and sweet air. The lilacs were in bloom and apple blossoms were a beginning pink froth in an orchard on the hill above. Elizabeth went quickly around the building toward the driveway. Behind her there were people and voices and state troopers. The manager was turning away party after party, explaining that there had been a slight accident and that the Persephone Caverns wouldn't be open until the following day.

Life—and death, she thought, the swiftness of the terrible transition. Dace had been plunged into eternity without a chance to pause, reflect, regret. Someone had usurped the awful powers of heaven. Let it not be one of them. Let it not. . . .

She stumbled, recovered herself and mounted a stretch of cropped lawn toward the graveled enclosure where the cars were drawn up.

Dace's roadster was there, and Hank's old Ford, and the long shining Rolls Fred Newell had given Crilly for her birthday, together with half a dozen other machines. She got into the Rolls and closed the door. White leather and black enamel and a marvelous dashboard. The compartment for odds and ends was to the right of the clock.

Elizabeth sat and stared at it. Was it only yesterday at noon that hunting for matches she had moved maps around in the compartment and had come on the gun? She hadn't thought much about it then.

At her exclamation Crilly had said, "What's the matter? . . . Oh, that. I generally carry it with me when I travel. We have money with us, and our rings and things, and we'll be going over some lonely roads. It's best to be on the safe side."

Was the gun still there? It had to be. Crilly wouldn't take a gun with her down into the caverns. Elizabeth leaned forward, pressed the knob and pulled the little door toward her.

The gun wasn't there.

She was still rummaging frantically through the compartment when a faint sound warned her. She sat very still. Lieutenant Vroonan was standing beside the car. He looked where she had been looking, then down into her face. . . .

VROONAN said patiently: "Why didn't you say you had a revolver in the first place, Miss Van Sant?"

Crilly stood tall and straight facing the Lieutenant coolly. "It didn't occur to me. I never thought of it in connection with Mrs. Gryce's death. It never even crossed my mind."

A half-hour had passed since Elizabeth had discovered that the gun wasn't

in the Rolls. Vroonan had gotten the truth out of her without much trouble. Dace had been shot, and Crilly had had a gun and the gun was missing. She forced herself to frantic attention, beating down waves of nausea, mounting fear.

They were all, with the dreadful exception of Miss Boone, the widower and the two little boys, in whom the police weren't interested, back in the building above the Persephone Caverns, Hank and Anthony shoulder to shoulder on one side of the Lieutenant's desk, Crilly, Jay and Fred Newell on the other. Elizabeth was between the two opposing camps, drawn to both of them, fearful for both.

Vroonan kept on pounding at Crilly. "What had you against Mrs. Gryce, Miss Van Sant?"

"Nothing, I tell you—nothing!" Crilly's voice was high and tight. She controlled herself with an effort, went on more quietly, "I didn't take the gun with me down into the caves. I don't know where it went, what happened to it. The last I saw of it was yesterday evening, when I parked the car outside the Inn at Coxsackie. It was there then."

"What was the make and caliber of the weapon in your car?"

"It was a Colt thirty-eight."

Vroonan went to the door, said something to a trooper outside, came back.

It was then that Fred Newell spoke, angry and shaking, and with poison in his sting.

"I'd like to point out that my fiancee's car with the pistol in it was in the Inn yard all night. Moreover"—and then he said it—"Miss Chandler and Mr. Anthony Gryce sat in the Rolls last night, and at one point in their conversation Miss Chandler opened the compartment and got out a package of cigarettes."

They were silent, all of them, while Fred Newell's words crashed and banged against the walls. What a harvest she had garnered, Elizabeth thought bitterly, and she had hoped for so much, had hoped to find the pistol and put one dreadful possibility behind her. Instead, she had made things a thousand times worse. Because what Fred said was true. He must have been near them in the covering night.

Outside, birds sang and the sun was shining, but inside the small crowded room there was darkness, and Dace springing into the air in her scarlet coat and falling into the black water with a bullet through her.

The door opened and the trooper came in and the terror thickened.

Dace had been killed with a Colt .38.

Crilly's gun was a .38 and it was missing, and only a limited number of people had had access to it. In other words, the people in that room!

Vroonan's crisp voice pierced the fog that swirled chokingly around Elizabeth.

He said: "You will all proceed to the Inn at Coxsackie where you will remain for questioning until further notice."

CHAPTER IV

THEY could have fought the police.

Crilly said: "What's the use? We'll only get their backs up. And we could all do with a rest."

There was very little rest for any of them that day, least of all Elizabeth. Vroonan had made it plain that as far as motive was concerned, Anthony was the odds-on favorite. He and Dace had been unhappy together, and Dace had refused to give him a divorce.

Hank said: "It wasn't Dace. It was Dace's aunt, Maida Fallon. She's as rich as Croesus, she doesn't believe in divorce, and Dace didn't want to offend her. Dace lived in terror of being cut off Maida's will."

He added that the old girl had been ill on her ranch in the West for the last two years, and couldn't live long. Anthony didn't have to resort to murder to get his freedom. All he had to do was wait.

Hank protested angrily going to the Inn.

"Our place is only five miles from here. Why can't we go home? With Dace dead, it doesn't seem decent to—"

"Murder isn't decent, Commander," Vroonan said curtly.

Later in the day the Lieutenant went to the farm himself and talked to the servants—and the evidence against Anthony piled up. Vroonan saw Elizabeth afterward, told her about it, watched her while he did so.

There had been a bitter quarrel between Anthony and Dace that morning. Contrary to her usual custom Dace hadn't breakfasted in bed. She had gone down to the dining room, fully dressed, at nine o'clock.

It wasn't the elderly housekeeper, in residence all year, who had spilled the beans. It was a new maid, hired at the unexpected advent of the family. Vroonan repeated the maid's testimony to Elizabeth, verbatim.

By Mrs. Gryce, to Mr. Anthony Gryce: "Why didn't you marry her, Anthony?"

"I—she was too young. I never thought of her in that way then."

"But you're thinking of her in that way now, aren't you? Oh, I saw you with the little trollop last night. What were you doing outside? Making up for lost time?"

Unfortunately at that point Hank Gryce had come along and the maid had scuttled off.

"Well, Miss Chandler. What have you to say to that?"

Elizabeth, very white, had nothing to say except, "No one's responsible for what Mrs. Gryce chose to think, without foundation. She was wrong. Anthony Gryce is a friend of mine. He's never been anything else. I'm going to marry Jay Sergeant."

The Lieutenant said drily, "So I understand," and asked if she knew that Dace was deeply in debt.

An examination of such papers as Mrs. Anthony Gryce possessed had made him dizzy. Two pairs of gloves, seventy-eight dollars and forty cents; three night robes, a hundred and five; one dozen pairs of stockings . . .

Elizabeth shrugged. "Well, she was Maida Fallon's niece."

Vroonan said Dace's aunt had given her an allowance, nothing more, and produced other items that seemed to him of interest. Dace had left Washington and a round of social engagements to bury herself in the country in order to be with a brother-in-law home from Japan who disliked her as thoroughly and openly as she disliked him. Which was peculiar. Her visit to the caverns was even more so. She had never previously shown the slightest interest in them, nor did she appear to have been enamored of any member of the party she joined.

"Any idea why she decided to go with you people, Miss Chandler?"

"Not the slightest."

ELIZABETH hadn't then. An idea, a possibility—more, a probability—struck her smashingly less than an hour later. At half past five she went for a walk, by herself.

The sun was going down. Long shadows barred the lawns and lay across perennial borders gay with narcissus and tulips, jonquils and clumps of azalea. It was the first time Elizabeth had been alone since her arrival at one o'clock. And she wanted to be alone to think things out, to try and make some sort of sense of them without the jarring impacts of so many assorted personalities and irrelevant problems.

If she hadn't been with Jay, Crilly and Fred Newell had been claiming her attention, to say nothing of a bullet-headed young man from the office of the state's attorney.

The lack of privacy was rubbing them all raw. She had left Crilly and Fred Newell in the middle of a quarrel. Fred didn't like the Inn, didn't like the beds, didn't like being requestioned, didn't like being kept there, and was vocal about it—and pompously tiresome and absurd.

He was going to get in touch with his father, was going to have his father speak to the Governor. These small time cops were officious asses. The food

would probably be execrable and he had a delicate stomach.

"Oh, Frederick, a murder's been committed—remember?" Crilly had snapped, as he had helped himself to a third doughnut during an expansive tea in the lovely old parlor.

"My dear Crilly," Fred had drawn himself up with offended majesty of the very best brand.

"Now, Fred darling, don't be silly. I only meant—"

Elizabeth had escaped in the thick of it, marveling at Crilly's patience. But they had had all that out before. Announcing her engagement to Fred two months earlier, Crilly had said:

"Don't look so astonished, Elizabeth. This is my chance, and I mean to take it. I'm thirty-two and not getting any younger. There's no harm in Fred, and I like him—and after the first month or two I imagine one man's pretty much the same as another. Who was it said the death of romance was an unshaven man in pajamas? Anyhow, what I want is security, and freedom from worry about money, and holding down a job. In the fashion business when you're fifty, you're through."

Well, the Newell woollen factories would give her these things, Elizabeth thought drily. But she was going to pay plenty for them. Fred Newell was vain, pompous, a petty tryant, extraordinarily fond of his own way and with a mistaken idea of his importance. He was a crashing bore to boot. What engaged her own immediate attention was his fright.

Because Fred Newell was frightened. It showed in his pallor, in his explosive laugh, his jerky movements, the way he clung to Crilly, following her around like a pet horse. Could there have been anything between Dace and Fred Newell? And more important, and more disturbing, could there have been anything, any hidden connection, between Dace and Crilly—or between Dace and Jay?

It was Hank who had brought this question into the open. Elizabeth thought wearily of the scene in the little bar after luncheon. Anthony had been there when she had gone in, sitting at one of the tables, an untouched highball in front of him, an unlighted cigarette between his fingers.

When he looked at her some of the tired bitterness had gone out of him, but not all. Yes, Dace had changed him. He wasn't the old merry devil-may-care Anthony; he was a stranger, a man who was older and harder and without illusions, a rising young diplomat edging his way into prominence—at a price.

THIS impression had vanished when he got up and taken her hands in his. She had drawn them away, gently, because there was still Jay.

Anthony hadn't seemed to notice her retreat. White lethargy had engulfed him again. He had been badly worried and it wasn't like him to worry. Every word of their brief conversation was imprinted on her mind.

"Elizabeth, when we were down there in those caves, you—didn't see anything?

"See anything? What do you mean?"

"Did you see Dace talking to anyone—anyone in particular?"

All her endeavor had been bent on trying not to see Dace.

"No, Anthony."

"Did Jay Sergeant ever speak to you of Dace? Has he ever mentioned knowing her?"

Anthony had been hesitant, anxious not to hurt. Hank had come limping in then, big and calm and outwardly cheerful, giving a little to his bad leg, which had been injured during the war, and there had been no hesitancy about him.

"There's more in this affair than meets the eye," he had said blandly. "It was Dace who insisted on coming over here last night—she was hell-bent on it—and I think she came to meet one of your party, infant. Got any dope?"

Elizabeth shook her head, coldness spreading through her as Hank had continued musingly, taking Anthony's highball and tossing it off in a couple of long swallows:

"I kept a pretty close eye on Dace. Maybe I spoiled somebody's little game. Maybe that was why Dace tried to slip away from the house alone this morning, why she decided to go down into the caves. Plenty of room there for a cozy little chat, in privacy. Look, Elizabeth—"

But she could tell him nothing. And he had made her angry with his questions concerning Jay.

"How much do you know about him, Elizabeth—really know? Why did he join you and Crilly Van Sant here? Couldn't he bear you out of his sight for more than twenty-four hours? Doesn't he trust you, or is he that much in love?"

She had lost her temper then, had flown out at Hank. Anthony had quieted her.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Elizabeth. He's only kidding."

But Hank wasn't. That was what rankled. She valued Hank's good opinion more than any one's in the world.

Crossing the fresh green grass through the ineffaceable beauty of the May dusk now she realized that it was her own doubt that had made her so violent. What after all did she know about Jay, except that he was attractive physically, and a good companion and amusing to be with? He was a man of thirty and part of his life, a significant part, was behind him.

Women? With Jay there would always have been women. The thought of possible predecessors had never troubled her. She knew that he loved her deeply, genuinely, more than she loved him. What was the French proverb—that in the game of love there is always one who cheats? But she hadn't cheated. She had been honest with him.

"I'm not in love with you, Jay, but I'm fond of you," she had told him.

He had been satisfied with that, had said he would make her love him. Perhaps if they hadn't come up here, if she hadn't met the Gryces again, he might have succeeded.

She gave her shoulders an impatient shake. Nostalgic nonsense. She was being a fool. What did the past matter in the face of the catastrophe that had overwhelmed them, the horror that had come into being in the dark underground world?

Elizabeth paused beside an apple tree, gripped a low bough with her hands and rested her forehead against the rough wood.

FACE it, she thought. Crilly hadn't been telling the truth, or not all of it —Crilly Van Sant, whom she had known since art school, who had given her a leg up so many times. She liked Crilly, was grateful to her—but facts were facts. She hadn't had a chance yet to ask Jay about Dace, but she had asked Crilly, and Crilly had been confused and upset.

Spilling her tea hadn't been an accident. She didn't have accidents of that sort. Jumping up, exclaiming at her skirt, she had said, "Will it stain, I wonder. . . . Jay? Did Jay know Mercedes Gryce before we came here, you mean? But darling, what put such an idea into your head? He may have met her about, casually, as Frederick and I did when we were in Washington. You know how you run into people at shindigs, restaurants, the theater. But that was the extent of it."

What had made Crilly spill her tea?

Elizabeth sat down on the low stone wall edging the garden, half-concealed by the dropping branches of the apple tree, laden with blossoms. Iris spiked the ground in front, tall and crisp and no color at all in the fading light. Beyond the gardens the hills poured upward, not savage as they sometimes were, but magnificently peaceful and protecting. She didn't want to go back to the Inn, with its dim corners, its narrow passages and old beams—and its people.

Dace's death had altered so much. Dace had been killed and they were all under suspicion. And it was Crilly's gun that was missing, and Crilly was different.

She sat up, startled. Jay and Crilly—it was as though she had invoked these last two. For they were there behind her, quite close, on the other side of the ancient yew hedge that backed the stone wall.

Crilly called, "With you in a moment, Fred," in her clear, carrying voice, and then she said, in a lower, sharper tone, "What is it, Jay? What did you drag me off here for?"

Jay was equally curt. "What do you think I'm made of—wood? I've been through hell all day. . . You got them?"

Elizabeth froze. Invisible behind the shield of green Crilly said, "Yes, of course I got them. I thought you'd gathered that. She gave them to me when we were going through that damn labyrinth."

"What did you do with them?"

"Put them in my bag."

"Weren't you afraid they'd be found on you when we were searched?"

"No, the police were only interested in a gun." Crilly's tone changed. "You didn't take my gun, did you, Jay?"

"No, Crilly, my dear. Did you take it yourself?"

A bird sang somewhere in the windless dusk. There was a little pause. Jay broke it with a laugh.

"There's no use our both going off half-cocked. Fred will come through all right. That's what you're worried about, isn't it? You destroyed them when you got back here?" Crilly must have shaken her head because he said, "No? Good God."

"Don't get excited, Jay." Crilly remained calm. "They're in a safe place. They're in an envelope in my hat-box. I want to make sure they're all there, and I haven't had a chance. When I go up to dress, after Elizabeth's downstairs, I'll look them over, then burn them. Dace was tricky, and if she kept one of them, if one of them should be found among her papers—"

Fred Newell called then, testily, and the two on the far side of the fence stopped talking and started to move away.

Elizabeth sat on where she was and looked down into the valley without any feeling. She looked at the broad fertile fields and the barns and the river along which the fur traders had come, through the valley that had been so furiously fought over for more than two hundred years.

The bloody Mohawk. The terror that had been there then was a hard ball in her breast now.

CRILLY and Jay—and Fred Newell—had been mixed up with Dace. The trip here, the descent into the caverns, was no holiday jaunt. She had denied Hank's suggestion of such a thing indignantly. Hank hadn't paid much attention to her denial. He had gone his own way. But Anthony had believed her, Anthony, who was in danger.

Elizabeth was icily angry. She jumped down off the wall. Dace had given Crilly papers of some sort in the caverns. Elizabeth knew she had to find those papers before Crilly had a chance to destroy them.

She walked fast, sticking to the fringe of the orchard. The Inn with its two smaller wings and its great hip roof that made it look like a ship upside down was quiet when she cut across the side lawn. It was getting dark. The lights were on.

Anthony and Hank were in the bar smoking and talking; Anthony quick, nervous, graceful; Hank four-square and quiet, puffing on his pipe. Darling Hank, she thought with a queer pang; always there when you needed him. It was good that he was with Anthony now.

She hurried on. The steps, the terrace. A trooper leaned on the lower half of the solid Dutch door with the top swung back.

The trooper stood aside to let Elizabeth pass, glancing with admiration at her figure, her averted face.

"Looks as though she's all in," he thought, and returned to the support that had originally been intended to keep the pigs out and let light and air into the house when the gardens had been a barnyard.

Elizabeth ran quickly up the stairs. Anthony and Hank were together in the bar, Fred and Jay and Crilly were somewhere in the grounds. But Crilly might be back at any moment. She must hurry.

Their rooms were side by side in the north wing, wide-boarded and low-ceilinged, with curtains at the tiny dormer windows and most of the space taken up by ponderous four-posters and chests and dressers. She went into her own room, locked her door, then went quickly through the connecting door into Crilly's room.

The hat-box was there, on a chest under a window, near the wardrobe bag Crilly had already capably unpacked. The hat-box was locked, but that was no impediment. Crilly's efficiency was going to betray her. Before they left New York she had said, "I've got plenty of room, so you can put stuff in my hat-box. Here's the other key. I may be out when you want something."

Elizabeth took the key from her purse. She ftted it in the lock of the hat-box, threw up the lid. An envelope. She found it after a maddening search through three pockets. It was a long envelope, with the end torn off, and Crilly's name on it. There were papers in the envelope, folded edges neatly tucked in.

How clever Crilly was. Her purse had been searched for the gun. An opened envelope hadn't roused any curiosity.

Elizabeth started to draw out the folded sheets of paper, moved to the north window first. It was all right. Far off and just visible through the fading light Crilly and Jay and Fred Newell were strolling slowly in the direction of the Inn. She had a good five minutes.

The room was dim and shadow filled its recesses, but there was enough light to see by. Elizabeth's heart was beating suffocatingly. Dace had given papers of some sort to Crilly in that trip through the caves, a trip that had ended with a bullet. Elizabeth started to remove the folded sheets—and paused.

There was someone at the door.

She stood where she was, her blood ice. The wing was isolated, the walls thick, and the narrow windows closed. A cry wouldn't be heard far. She told herself desperately that perhaps she had imagined the faint sound, the ghost of a footstep. She hadn't imagined it. Quietly and without noise, the latch clicked up and the door began to open.

CHAPTER V

ELIZABETH. Good Lord, what is it? You're as white as a ghost. Did I frighten you? I've been looking for you all over."

It was Hank who stood in the doorway, his wide shoulders blocked against dimness.

Elizabeth gazed at him across twenty feet of space and an eternity of distance. She was as stunned as though she had received a blow with a club.

What was Hank doing here? He hadn't come in search of her. Sure of nothing else in a tottering universe, Elizabeth was sure of that. No, Hank—Hank!—had come up here secretly, to Crilly's room, for some purpose of his own, and he was as surprised to see her as she was to see him.

She should have been frightened. She couldn't be afraid of Hank. But she was afraid of what he might find out.

Her left hand hung at her side. Her right, with the envelope doubled up in it, was in her sweater pocket. Had he seen her thrust the envelope there? He mustn't see it, no one must, until she found out what the envelope contained. Meanwhile, Hank mustn't suspect her.

She forced herself to speak carelessly. "I should say you did frighten me. Go away at once. A girl's got to have some time to herself. I want to bathe, and change, and fix my face."

Hank sighed loudly. "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. Will you have dinner with Anthony and me, Elizabeth? We want to talk to you." He had come closer, was looking down at her with the penetrating eyes that saw so much. "I used

to be able to order you around, Elizabeth."

"I'm a big girl now." She smiled, stepped back.

Hank didn't smile. He continued to survey her gravely.

She started. Crilly's voice sounded in the stairwell, but Hank didn't move.

"I can't have dinner with you, Hank," she said hurriedly. "The others would think it strange." Strange, she thought, what a funny word, where all was unknown, terrifying. She added quickly, "Besides, we can talk afterward."

Hank went then, and as soon as he was gone Elizabeth flew across the room. She closed the lid of the hat-box, snapped the lock and went through the connecting doorway into her own room, to return as Crilly appeared. But without the envelope. She had pushed it hastily under the hooked rug in front of her bureau.

She didn't want Crilly to find out that the envelope was gone until she had had a chance to examine its contents. The only way to keep Crilly from finding out was to stay with her until they went downstairs, then to slip up here by herself later on.

To plan was one thing, to carry out your plan was another. For Elizabeth the next few hours were a gray jumble of thwarted effort. She did succeed in preventing Crilly from discovering then and there that the envelope with its enigmatic cargo had been removed from the hat-box. Or thought she did.

Crilly exclaimed at Elizabeth's appearance with apparent concern, and a glance of the penetrating brown eyes of which the younger girl was becoming afraid.

"You look frightful, darling. Why don't you go straight down now, and grab yourself a cocktail? You don't need to wait for me. I'll be along in a few minutes."

Elizabeth didn't go. "I don't mind waiting, Crilly. It's a relief to be up here and away from the police."

She longed for a cold shower, but she didn't dare to leave the room. Powder, lipstick, a lavender linen dress, a white cardigan—once she surprised Crilly studying her thoughtfully in the depths of a cloudy mirror. But all Crilly said was:

"You're worried, aren't you, Elizabeth? Don't be. As long as the police can't find a gun, mine or anyone else's, they won't be able to do much. A woman was shot. Well—she had to be shot with something. They'll have to produce the weapon that killed Dace. Guesses, suppositions, aren't going to do them any good."

ELIZABETH froze. Could Crilly possibly have seen her hide that heavy blunt black thing down there in that dreadful place?

Always and ever, over and above all other worries, was the fear that it would be found.

She said idly, "What do you suppose happened to your gun?"

Crilly shrugged shapely shoulders and got into a pair of fragmentary step-ins.

"Perhaps someone stole it out of the car here at the Inn, before we went near the caves. But there's no proof Mercedes Gryce was shot with my revolver, none whatever."

She inserted her supple length into a simple and expensive black crepe dinner dress, thrust pins into the satin smooth mahogany hair drawn sleekly back and fastened in a knot at the crown of her head. She would make a wife Fred Newell could be proud of, and she would handle the Newell millions well, as she handled the work at the office, quickly, effciently and with decision, Elizabeth reflected, and felt as though she had dreamed that conversation piece behind the yew hedge—and knew she hadn't.

There were several tense moments. As they were about to leave the room Crilly said: 'Oh, my perfume—it's in my hat-box," and moved towards the chest. She didn't open it. When Elizabeth made as if to join her, she said: "It's too much trouble. I'll use yours." And then when Elizabeth went into her own room to transfer the envelope to a safer hiding

place she had to work fast and keep talking through the open door.

It was done finally, and they were going down the stairs together. Jay and Fred Newell were waiting for them in the beamed hall, Fred weedy and elegant and fretful in a black jacket and black tie, for he never traveled even for a few hours without a complete wardrobe. Jay was in tweeds, his hair, that was a few shades darker than Crilly's, a smooth cap on his good-looking head.

Elizabeth didn't miss the glance that flew between Jay and Crilly, or Crilly's faint shrug. Jay tucked a hand under Elizabeth's arm and smiled at her cheerfully. For the first time his touch was disagreeable to her. She wanted to pull away, but didn't. She could play a part, too. Neither Jay nor Crilly must suspect her until she had looked at the papers hidden in her own room.

Dinner was another stretch in the nightmare, unreal, monstrous. Inconsequential talk, of Crilly and Fred's wedding, laid a surface over the confusion and fear and suspense that was in all of them. Fred's long face looked sullen, and he stammered quite a bit, and several times Elizabeth caught Jay watching her narrowly, his eyes uneasy, speculative.

The dining room was not crowded. It was too early in the season. Anthony and Hank were at the far end of the room. They finished their meal first, stopped to speak on the way out.

The jittery sharpness of the morning was gone. The armed truce that replaced it was infinitely more disturbing. Casual greetings, remarks about the food, the weather. There was no reference to the terrible bond that kept them there, a chain gang bound together by the iron links of murder. The sight of Anthony, tall and fair and fine, and haggardly worn, did things to Elizabeth. He spoke to the others. His gaze was for her.

Hank was beside him, not the Hank she knew, quiet and comforting and kind, but a grim-jawed stranger. He looked at her unsmilingly, colored faintly, and looked away.

"Get going, boy." He gave Anthony a prod and the two of them moved off.

ELIZABETH was glad when they were gone.

After dinner she and Crilly and Jay and Fred went into the little bar for coffee and liqueurs. Fred was in his best vein. He kept giving them bits of information from the guide book in his pocket about the Mohawk Valley, its position as the storehouse of the terrible Indian raids, the hatred of the Onondagas for the French, the saving of the new world for the British.

Being read to aloud was one of the worst burdens Crilly was going to have to bear. It ought, Elizabeth reflected, to be a penal offense. In the middle of a disquisition on furs—"the price of a dress, a piece of land, was calculated in beaver skins"—she pushed back her chair. Now was her chance to get upstairs alone.

But Jay, who had strolled away boredly, was beside her.

"Come out and show me your hills," he said. "There's a moon."

There was no moon, for it was behind clouds, and on the terrace, in darkness, Jay put his arms around her and kissed her closely, angrily. Releasing her he said:

"Why didn't you tell me about Gryce?"

His hands gripped her shoulders, hurting her.

"Which Gryce?"

"You know which," Jay said in a hard voice. "I'm not blind, darling."

Elizabeth tucked in a strand of hair shakily. Ought she to speak, to say,

"You're right, Jay. I love Anthony. He's free now, and if he wants me—"

She remained silent. Perhaps Anthony didn't want her. Moreover, she had promised to be Jay's wife, and he loved her deeply. But he was certainly concealing things from her. She didn't know how vital they were. In fairness she must do nothing decisive until she had examined the contents of the en-

velope she had taken from Crilly's hatbox.

Jay was waiting for an answer. She said lightly, "Don't be silly, Jay. The Gryces, both the Gryces, are my friends, that's all."

He drew her to him. "I was afraid . . ."

A shadow detached itself from other shadows beyond the terrace. The shadow was Lieutenant Vroonan.

"Good evening."

The Lieutenant wanted to talk to them again.

He took them one after another. Dreadfully, while Elizabeth waited her turn, the thought of the envelope hidden in her room kept striking at her. Suppose their rooms were searched and the envelope found? There was nothing she would do to try to get at it while the police were in the Inn though. It was too much of a risk.

Elizabeth was the last to be questioned.

"Just go over it again, will you, Miss Chandler?"

The swarthy Lieutenant was checking her statement to see whether it coincided with what she had said that morning, with what the rest had said.

It went on and on, grindingly, persistently. The others were in bed and the lower floor of the Inn was deserted when Elizabeth was finally released, a tired girl in lavender linen, her milky skin as white as the cardigan draping her shoulders.

"Good night, Lieutenant."

"Good night, and thank you, Miss Chandler."

Irony flavored his voice, and Elizabeth was careful to mount the stairs slowly, without eagerness. Vroonan watched her slender figure retreat and listened to the key turn in the lock of her bedroom door and left the Inn, moody and dissatisfied. He was convinced that the Chandler girl was concealing something important, something he hadn't been able to get out of her.

INSIDE her bedroom with the door locked, Elizabeth went to the door that separated her from Crilly and listened, an ear to the panel. No sound whatever came from beyond the door. Crilly was probably asleep. She had said good night an hour earlier.

Elizabeth slipped the catch on the door, a nib holding the latch in place. No one could disturb her now. Shadows lined the little room, clustered somnolently in the corners. The delft blue curtains were drawn across the recessed dormer window. Light from a single lamp beside the ponderous bed fell faintly on the huge dresser, the front of a carved chest.

Elizabeth went between dresser and bed and past a high carved chair to the closet under the eaves where the envelope was concealed. Her heart was beating thickly. She could hear and feel its dull thump. Perhaps Vroonan's man had found the hidden envelope.

It wasn't gone. It was there, in the crown of her big straw hat, thrown carelessly on the shelf. She pulled the hat down, removed the envelope, looked at it. She was about to read correspondence that a dead woman had passed over to Crilly. She felt shaky, sick.

The thought of Anthony in jeopardy of his life strengthened her. She drew the contents out. There were three sheets of paper—letters. They were from Jay to Dace, the handwriting was Jay's. Elizabeth read:

Dear Dace: To say that your news was a shock is to put it mildly. No matter how hard it is, I must see you at—"

Elizabeth stood very still. She was in front of the closet, facing it. Her back was to the window. She didn't see the long blue curtains stir, part, the shadow on shadows detach itself from obscurity and start across the floor as silently as a drifting leaf. But she was afraid. Fear was all through her, a paralyzing current that locked her muscles and stopped the breath in her throat. She caught a faint odor—just what it was eluded her in that moment of fear. But it was familiar. She wondered—

Before she could turn, move, blackness descended over her, a hot stuffy

choking blackness that smothered her in thick clinging folds. Someone had thrown something over her head. She struggled fiercely. Her struggles stopped with the blow, and she pitched forward into a pit in which there was nothing at all.

* * * * *

"Take one of those pillows away. . . . That's right. . . . Yes, color's better. And her pulse is picking up."

"She's coming to?"

"I think so."

"Stand back a little."

Elizabeth stirred. There was softness under her and smoothness over her and she was warm instead of cold. She wasn't dead. She curled her toes around a hot water bottle and opened her eyes.

She was lying in the bed in her bedroom at the Inn. It wasn't night; it was day. Sunlight flooded through the windows. There were a lot of people standing around. She picked out faces carefully—Crilly, without makeup, her hair in a net, so that her head looked small like a monkey's, and Jay in a bathrobe, his eyes darkly shining, and Hank big and broad-shouldered in violently striped pajamas, a razor in his hand—and Anthony.

His haggard whiteness went through her like pain.

Someone moved, and an odor touched her nostrils, an odor connected in some way with the night before, and at that, memory came rushing back over Elizabeth.

"Oh!" Her hand went to her throat and she tried to turn her head to look at the closet door, but her head hurt and the mist in front of her eyes thickened. She pushed it away.

"Did you get the—the one who came in here last night?"

THERE was a small, abrupt pause. someone said, "Elizabeth—" someone else said, "She's not out from under yet," and Crilly said, agitatedly, "She's delirious, Doctor?" And then Lieutenant Vroonan and the doctor were there and no one else.

"Miss Chandler—" The Lieutenant was kind, fatherly, and he hadn't shaved either. "There was no one here last night," he told her, soothingly, "except yourself. Your doors were locked. Don't you remember what happened?"

He was actually arch. Elizabeth began to get angry.

"But there was someone here," she said. "I was at the closet and the lights went out, and something was thrown over me, and I was struck."

"Wait a minute. . . ."

The Lieutenant went to the closet, came back with a big leather bucket and her dark blue negligee.

He said: "You were found lying on the closet floor this morning by Miss Van Sant, who raised the roof when she called you and didn't get any reply. This negligee was draped over you, and this"—he tapped the heavy leather bucket—"was on the floor beside you. You evidently reached up last night to get something off the shelf and the bucket toppled and hit you an almighty crack on the head and knocked you completely unconscious."

Elizabeth stared at him, at the thin silk of the negligee, at the leather bucket with "brandt," the Dutch word for fire, printed on the side in hand-blocked letters. The negligee could never have smothered her in those heavy clinging black folds, she had felt, and it wasn't the bucket that had struck her.

It was a fist, of flesh, with bone behind it.

"No," she said, wrestling with the mist and memory. "No, I tell you there was someone in here."

The doctor and the Lieutenant exchanged glances. The more she insisted, the kinder they became.

"Now, Miss Chandler—" The doctor minced and pirouetted in a spout of bedside manner. "Quite understandable . . . Rest and sleep. Perhaps a slight concussion. A mild sedative. . . . Just drink this."

Elizabeth pushed his hand away and tried again to explain—and desisted. She was too tired. She drank, and slept.

CHAPTER VI

DOWNSTAIRS in the Inn, all that day, the investigation into the murder of Mercedes Gryce continued. Dace's aunt in Arizona could give no information, relative or irrelevant, about her niece. Maida Fallon was dead.

In the Persephone Caverns the dragging of the underground went steadily on.

As far as Elizabeth was concerned Vroonan was convinced that her mishap was an accident. He still felt that she was concealing something important. She had borne the marks of it the night before, her loveliness veiled with exhaustion, her luminous skin pale, and the black-lashed eyes dark with strain. He thought about her intensively. Intelligent, from the fashion in which she answered his questions, probably in love with Anthony Gryce from the frightened way she spoke his name.

He sighed heavily and thought about Crilly Van Sant. She was an ambitious, clever woman, with a firm, far-seeing cleverness that would be dangerous to anyone who tried to interfere with her. If she had no motive showing openly, she had plenty of opportunity—and her gun was gone. He put a check against her name, and went on to the Gryces.

Hank Gryce he both liked and respected—which didn't prevent Hank's being their man. His reputation was A-1, he was well-liked in the valley, he had been cited for bravery in an action in the Pacific. He was also strong and determined, and with a tough streak in him, the sort of fellow who would stop at nothing, or almost nothing, for the people he loved—and Mercedes Gryce had been making his brother's life hell for years.

Vroonan drew morosely on a crumpled cigarette. Jay Sergeant was harder to figure out. He was naturally secretive, difficult to pin down. But he was as jittery as hell under that cool manner—and the client in Albany was a myth. Taxed with it, Sergeant had said blandly, "We came simply and solely to see the girls." Well, you couldn't put him in jail for that.

Vroonan flicked Frederick Newell over with a grimace. Hank Gryce had said about Crilly Van Sant's prospective husband, "All wool but not a yard wide. I'd just as soon go round arm in arm with a cathedral, myself." But Newell of Newell Woollens was a gold-plated cathedral, and Mercedes Gryce could easily have been in the mining business. Suppose Newell had been mixed up with the little so-and-so at some time or other.

Anthony Gryce was the last on the list, and the first. "And lo, Abou Ben Adhem's name led all the rest." An appalling amount of incriminating fact was piled up against him. Motive—one hundred per cent; opportunity, ditto. Anthony was more sensitive than Hank, less blunt, and with more personal magnetism. They had grilled him until they were all blue with cigarette smoke and futility and fatigue, without gaining an inch.

Anthony said he hadn't killed his wife, and he didn't know who had. He admitted with discouraging honesty that he had begged her to divorce him before they had been married six months, that they didn't get along, that they had quarreled fiercely on the morning she died, and that he had followed her to the caverns, nervous about Elizabeth, of what Dace might do or say.

"But," he had said, "if you added up the husbands who didn't care for the women they'd married and stuck a dollar sign in front of the total it would look like a sizable section of the national debt." Which was true.

IT DIDN'T alter the fact that Mercedes Gryce had been shot at the one time and in the one place where the killer could get away with it. Take a bead on your victim, lights out, and then the shot. Anthony and Hank Gryce both knew the caves, had played in them as

boys, but unfortunately the guide books with which the rest of the party were furnished would have given the others the necessary knowledge also.

They had to find the gun. No solution was possible without it. The Lieutenant was positive that there would be fingerprints on it. As soon as the shot was fired the lights had been switched on. There had been no time to do any polishing, the killer must have flung the weapon from him instantly.

The State's Attorney was of the same opinion. He said so, with vigor, over the phone.

"We've got to get hold of the murder weapon, Vroonan, or we won't have a leg to stand on. No dice, no soap, no case. Can you imagine what counsel for the defense would do with it—or rather, without it?"

Vroonan said he could, grimly, and left the Inn to press the search for the gun, in person. It was after four when he drove away.

Elizabeth watched him go, through her bedroom window, propped up on pillows. Anthony was with her. He had come in with the maid, who had gone down for a tray when she woke a few minutes earlier. He poured her coffee, made her eat a piece of toast, and lit her cigarette.

He didn't say much, but he knew there was something wrong. She might deceive others, but she couldn't deceive Anthony. She would rather not have confided in him, couldn't confide in him fully, but there were certain things she had to know, and there was no one else she could trust.

She sent the maid out of the room.

Vroonan hadn't believed her, or the doctor, but Anthony did, instantly. Before she had said more than a few words his arms were around her.

"You might have been killed," he said, holding her close. "That fool of a state policeman! That fool!"

He pulled up a chair and sat down beside her, holding her hand in his, and Elizabeth told him part of it, but not all.

"I came up here and I locked the door into the hall and the door into Crilly's room and went to the closet. While I was standing there, just in front of the closet door, someone came up behind me and threw something heavy and dark over my head and I couldn't breath and then I was struck."

Anthony stared at her. He was white. But he kept his head.

"In the first place, how did whoever attacked you get in?"

Elizabeth's eyes flew to the door into Crilly's room but Anthony said, "No. Crilly roused the whole floor when she couldn't wake you. The door was locked from the inside. It was only after a lot of jiggling that we got loose the nib that holds the latch down. But what about the windows?"

He went to it, looked out and turned, his eyes shining narrowly above a stern mouth.

"Yes," he said, "that's the way your visitor came. There's a ledge here at the eaves where the hip flattens out that a child could negotiate. Wait!—"

He was over the sill, came back in a minute. He was agile, graceful to watch. The roof could have been reached from the other wing or, of course, by Crilly from the room next door. They had solved nothing except means.

Anthony went further than that, doggedly, sternness deepening in him.

"Why were you attacked, Elizabeth—why? That's what we've got to establish."

ELIZABETH told him then, about the gun. He looked at her, stunned. He was appalled, incredulous.

"You say it hit you in the ankle and you picked it up and got rid of it?"

"Yes, I dropped it down into a crevice of the rock I was leaning against. I heard it hit bottom somewhere, just as the police arrived."

But it wasn't the gun, it was the envelope she had taken from Crilly's hatbox that had motivated the attack on her last night. She didn't tell Anthony that, but she was sure of it.

Anthony was puzzled and grim. "I

don't get it," he said, jumping up and walking around the room, rumpling his fair hair into a disorderly crest. "Whoever shot Dace doesn't know what you did with the pistol. You're sure no one saw you? Then there must be something else. Think, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth didn't have to think—she knew. She had stolen the letters from Crilly that Crilly had got from Dace. Someone had stolen them from her. It wasn't the police. The letter she had read was from Jay to Dace. Get hold of Jay alone as soon as possible and force him to tell her the truth.

Anthony was looking at her. He said slowly, "Elizabeth, there is something."

His eyes frightened her. They were so hard, demanding. She exerted her strength, put him off. "There isn't anything else that I can recall, now. Perhaps it will come to me later."

A maid knocked at the door and said that Anthony was wanted on the phone and he went, reluctantly. Left alone, Elizabeth got up, took a shower and began to dress, patterns forming and reforming in her tired brain.

"To say that your news was a surprise"—what news? If only she had been able to read further. Crilly must know what the letters contained, for she had got them from Dace. Did they reveal something that might interfere with Crilly's marriage to Fred? The Newells, into whose collective bosom she had climbed with effort, or was about to, wore a Brahmin's robe across whose purity no shadow must fall.

Suppose Fred Newell himself had been involved with Dace, and Jay had simply acted as an intermediary? That was all very well, but why should Dace have given the letters back? Unless—Crilly might have threatened to go to Dace's aunt. Maida Fallon might have been old and ill, but up until the last moment she could still wield a pen and change her will.

Suppose wasn't any good, Elizabeth thought wearily, pulling on a pair of stockings. What she had to do was to go to Jay at once and then to Crilly.

She almost reversed the process. For Crilly came in while she was struggling with a recalcitrant slip strap and helped her, scoldingly.

"Getting up, are you? You don't know when you're well off. I've never spent such a hellish day in my life. Inside, we have the police crawling under our chairs; outside, we run into clumps of gaping troopers with their mouths open like birds. We ought to split the gate with the caverns. It would be only fair."

Crilly was ravaged. She had put on too much make-up and her hands were hot and dry. At the closet, getting out a white flannel dress, she said without turning:

"You don't remember anything about last night, don't remember pulling the bucket down on yourself?"

Elizabeth stared at her straight back. Should she tax Crilly with the letters now? She decided against it. The letters were gone, and if she did ask, Crilly might simply lie out of it and make Jay back her up. She was strong and could be ruthless, and Jay was very fond of her. Say nothing now.

"No, I don't remember a thing," Elizabeth used lipstick and stared into the mirror at her own white face.

Crilly laughed at her expression. "This was going to be our vacation, remember?" she said bitterly. "We were going to rest—and look at us! We're both frights."

She answered in kind. "I don't think we look half bad, considering."

THE falseness, the uneasy chatter between them, the hidden distrust rasped at her nerves. It was no better when she got downstairs. She went down ahead to search for Jay, and ran into Hank instead.

There was a deserted air about the lower floor. Twilight hung softly outside the windows and the corners were dim. Hank was in the bar. He got up when he saw her and asked her how she felt.

She said, "I'm all right. I'm fine, Hank. Where's Jay? Do you know?"

"No," Hank said, eyeing her queerly,

"and I don't want to. I've seen enough of Mr. Jay Sergeant to last me a lifetime. Sit down and have a drink."

There was ice and soda and a bottle of Scotch in front of him. He mixed her a highball and threw himself back on the big blue leather seat opposite. It struck Elizabeth suddenly that he had had a little too much to drink.

He grinned at her and said, "Yes, I'm high, my darling. . . . I never called you that before, did I, Elizabeth?"

She didn't answer, and he laughed again and said, his voice rough and deep: "I'm the noble, silent type. The Bar X hero. You'd never know it, would you, to look at me?"

"Know what?" Elizabeth murmured, afraid to ask and yet compelled to by the hard hazel light in the eyes close to hers, eyes in which there was no laughter, but instead something that startled and confused her and made her heart beat hard.

"That I've wanted you for a hell of a long time," Hank said calmly. "But it seems I couldn't have you, ever. No. First there was Anthony, and then Jay Sergeant. Now you're back to Anthony, with no Dace in the way any more. Tough for me but best for you—or words to that effect. That's the way you want it, Elizabeth, isn't it? Don't throw down your drink like that—I've finished. Stay with me for a little while."

Elizabeth stared at him unseeingly. Her world had been knocked upside down. She said hastily, on a long breath, "I can't, Hank dear, I've got to—to find Jay," and escaped.

She was astonished and incredulous and bewildered. It was hard, almost impossible, to readjust Hank in her mind, Hank whom she had always adored, but who stood so aloof, who was invulnerable and strong and detachedly amused, who had gone out and got everything he wanted for himself and for Anthony. She hated to think of him, brought up short and looking like that, savage and alien and hurt, because of her.

In the hall Elizabeth ran head-on into Fred Newell. She excused herself, chattering aimlessly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you. It's dim. There ought to be a lamp lit. . . Have you seen Jay? Do you know where he is?"

Fred stared at her out of red-rimmed eyes, annoyed and peering, a crane in expensive weeds, bobbing a long neck.

"Jay?" he said, and rubbed an elbow with knuckly fingers. "He's outside, I think. That is, to the best of my knowledge. I saw him a few minutes ago. Can I assist you in finding him?"

Elizabeth's inward laughter had a touch of hysteria in it. Fred never used one word where two would do. She said no and started for the side door. The last she saw of Fred he was standing at the foot of the stairs, staring after her through the gloom.

Jay wasn't in the gardens, or at least he wasn't in sight. Elizabeth was uneasily conscious of a trooper in puttees and a dark uniform trailing her at a distance through the warm, flower-scented dusk. The beauty made her throat ache.

Jay wasn't outside. He was in his room. She saw his light flash on as she topped the rise beyond the kitchen gardens. She started down between rows of onions and young lettuce, a clear burning green in the dusk, and went into the Inn through the side door.

HANK was no longer in the bar. It was empty. Upstairs, she paused for thought. Jay's room was at the end of the corridor that bisected the south wing.

She moved along the corridor quietly. Bulbs in old wall fixtures made pools of light here and there, shone down on a faded green carpet, on the motionless white doors, massive and a little crooked in their frames. Jay's room, Number 79, was the last one on the left. She stopped for a moment in front of the door and looked through a small hall window at night coming down over the silent hills, a warm blue-black night studded with the first stars.

Her mind was still full of Hank and what he had said, and she was achingly unhappy and afraid. And yet, some-

how, she had another feeling, a faint warm wonder. It was as though someone, carved in stone on a very high pedestal, had leaned down and whistled at you. In the midst of tragedy and terror, Elizabeth found herself smiling.

Her smile went away. Because it was Hank who had found her in Crilly's room when he went there the evening before, and as Hank entered she had shoved the envelope into her pocket.

She pulled herself together, raised her hand, and tapped lightly on Jay's door. He didn't answer and she knocked again, harder. Farther along the corridor another door opened and closed, and it occurred to her that she had better not be seen. In addition to everything else, a surreptitious visit to Jay's room by her would add a fruity note of scandal to the items already being enjoyed by the servants and the police.

Jay's door wasn't locked. She lifted the latch and slipped inside.

The light was on. A lamp under an orange shade burned cheerfully on a table near the window. The bedroom was big, ell-shaped. She could only see part of it. Jay wasn't in sight. But his top coat was thrown over a chair. She called his name, softly. He didn't answer. Yet something moved, quietly, in the shadows of the ell.

Elizabeth's heart thumped. Fred Newell's room was on the other side of an antiquated bath that separated him from Jay. Fred likely had come upstairs to dress after she had left him, but dressing was a lengthy business with him. Was he standing there, out of sight, listening to her, wondering why she had come? Wondering? Perhaps knowing?

Elizabeth started forward. And it was there in the silent room, faint but perceptible, the odor that had assailed her nostrils the night before when blackness had descended over her in the closet in her own room. She knew what it was now. She had smelled it often enough.

Jay, she thought swiftly. It wasn't Crilly or Fred Newell or Hank who had crept along the eaves and in through her window, it was Jay.

She rounded the jut of the wall and came on him.

He was there, in front of her, off the floor, a long dark shape, swinging and twisting a little, twisting slowly. There was a beam overhead. Jay was suspended from the beam by something white. His eyes were open and his face—

Elizabeth tripped, and beat at the silent air, and went down screaming.

CHAPTER VII

YOU smelled the odor and you went around the corner and saw Jay Sergeant. What were you doing in his room, Miss Chandler?"

Lieutenant Vroonan was tired. Fatigue showed in the taut snap of his voice.

It curled around Elizabeth like a whip. She wanted to get away from it and couldn't. There was no escape anywhere. Unconsciousness, even for a minute, was denied her. She hadn't fainted. An hour had passed since she found Jay, but every slightest detail was still darkly clear.

People running into that room, white faces. Cries of terror. A surge backward. Crilly's explosive sobs. Fred Newell's retching, someone's arm around her, someone saying, "Don't look—close your eyes," and all the time that hanging shape was there, suspended from the beam, elliptical, twisting, and yet so still. That at least she was shut away from, couldn't see any more.

"I went to—to Jay's room to talk to him."

The time had come to stop evading, trying to find out things for yourself, to shield people. She told Vroonan about overhearing Jay and Crilly talking of the letters Dace had handed to Crilly in the cavern, about taking them, reiterated the story of the attack on her, and the disappearance of the letters.

Vroonan saw the light too late. He

swore forcefully, said to a trooper at his elbow:

"Get Miss Van Sant."

Crilly was brought in, a walking, talking doll with a broken mainspring, wooden, blank-faced, blank-eyed.

Crilly spoke in a thin, hard voice. She said that Mercedes and Jay weren't strangers. Far from it. They had been lovers not very long ago and Dace had kept letters of Jay's. After Dace found out that Jay was engaged to Elizabeth she had demanded money from him, money with which to stave off her creditors so that they wouldn't go to her aunt.

The demand had been made two weeks ago. Jay had confided in Crilly and Crilly had called Dace's bluff. She had pointed out that if Dace had Jay where the wool was short, Jay had her where the wool was even shorter. Elizabeth mightn't want a man who had had a serious affair with the wife of her oldest and best friend, but if Maida Fallon objected to her niece's debts she would object infinitely more to her proved infidelity.

"Dace was essentially a stupid woman," Crilly said contemptuously, "and an ostrich in the bargain. She ran away from Washington to escape her creditors until Jay should produce. I got in touch with her at the Gryce house up here. She agreed to meet me at this Inn and hand over the letters on the night we got here. But she didn't give them to me. Her husband and brother-in-law came with her, and Hank Gryce watched her like a cat. That was why we arranged to meet in the Persephone Caverns the next morning. We did, and she gave me the letters then, while we were going through the cave. And—that's all."

Crilly denied having attacked Elizabeth or taking the letters. She said she was in her room when Jay had—had done that dreadful thing.

Without warning she toppled off her chair all in one piece, a figure cut out of cardboard. She was removed.

Vroonan began again on Elizabeth.

"Now this odor you keep talking about, Miss Chandler, the odor you smelled last night when you were attacked, and again this evening when you found the body?"

"What does it matter, Lieutenant? Jay committed suicide."

VROONAN let her have it then, brutally. Jay hadn't taken his own life. He had been murdered.

"Yes, Miss Chandler, yes."

His death had been staged, clumsily, because there had been so little time to make it look like self-destruction.

Leaden rain fell on Elizabeth's bent head, her huddled shoulders. But she had been battered too much to feel more than its initial impact. And she had known the truth, obscurely.

Vroonan said, "While you were looking for Jay Sergeant someone went into his room and strangled him—with this."

Jay's white silk scarf appeared in front of her, vanished. Vroonan's voice went on:

"The hook in the beam that was formerly used to hold an old lamp was convenient. The scarf was looped over it and Sergeant was lifted. Only, you see, the chair he was supposed to step off and kick away when he let himself drop wasn't quite high enough to permit him to do what he was supposed to have done. It was a tall person who hung the body there and escaped shortly before you entered the room."

A tall person. Crilly, Fred Newell, Anthony, Hank. Stop it, her mind shouted.

"You didn't hear anyone, see anyone when you were in Sergeant's room, or on the way there?"

A door had opened and closed, softly, while she had been in the corridor. But she hadn't turned? She said no.

"Would you recognize the odor you spoke of, the odor that was in the vicinity of the body, if you smelled it again, Miss Chandler?"

In heaven or hell, Elizabeth thought dully. "I might, Lientenant."

"Well then, suppose we try an experiment."

A clean white handkerchief was produced, drawn across her eyes, knotted

at the back of her head.

The Lieutenant had had every lotion, powder, soap, perfume, toilet water, shaving cream and toothpaste in the Inn, collected. Elizabeth leaned forward, a slim dark-haired girl with bandaged eyes, holding the seat of her chair tightly, while the short squat State Police Lieutenant offered her one specimen after another.

And it was there, somewhere in the middle of those varied scents, tingling, aromatic and dreadful—and Elizabeth's last hope died. It wasn't an outsider who had killed Dace and Jay; it was one of themselves. She pressed her lips together and tried to swallow.

"Well, Miss Chandler, this it?"

What was Vroonan holding to her nostrils, to whom did it belong? Elizabeth fought waves of weakness. She couldn't chance it.

"No, Lieutenant." Her voice came flatly, without stress. "It was heavier, sharper."

The experiment went on, ended. Vroonan let her go then.

"Better get some dinner, Miss Chandler. You've had a nasty shock."

Eating was something you did in another world, a world that had begun to recede when Dace's body had slapped the surface of that dark underground water, that had crashed into a million pieces when she had come to Jay.

She stood still in the corridor outside the door of the Lieutenant's temporary office wondering vacantly what to do next, and swaying a little.

Anthony's voice said, "Elizabeth," and she reached out for him blindly. He took her arm and led her into the bar, away from a knot of troopers and a frightened maid and Fred Newell who was talking to someone near the foot of the stairs.

An apprehensive waiter appeared and Anthony ordered. The waiter brought food and scuttled off, out of enemy territory.

ANTHONY sat beside Elizabeth on the blue leather bench. He didn't touch her. He was as careful and gentle as though he were talking to a child.

"Elizabeth, don't think of it, don't think of anything. Make yourself not. You must eat."

Time passed. People came and went. They were all requestioned. Crilly went upstairs and shut herself into her room. Fred Newell came out from talking to Vroonan, his mouth slack, his small eyes cold and steady.

After Fred Newell, Anthony again. Not Hank. They didn't talk to Hank. Anthony looked frightful when he came out.

"Go to bed, Elizabeth, dear. Try and get some rest, there's nothing you can do." He kissed her absently.

Less than an hour later the blow fell. At ten o'clock that night the police arrested Hank Gryce for the murders of his sister-in-law and Jay Sergeant. . . .

There were no words. Words weren't made for the horror of it. Elizabeth didn't go to bed. Inside her locked doors she crouched and shivered and walked the floor endlessly. They had taken Hank away. The few minutes before they took him away kept repeating themselves—Anthony's raised voice ringing like a horseshoe flung through glass, smashing the ominous silence; the hush below the stairs.

"No—no! Not Hank. No, I tell you."

And Hank, calm, apparently unmoved, a little peremptory. "Cut it out, Anthony. They're cockeyed. But if they want to make fools of themselves, let them. They have nothing to go on."

But they had. They had the bottle of shaving lotion, the bottle to which Elizabeth had led them. For Vroonan had noticed her hesitation over one particular odor and it was a bottle of shaving lotion that they found hidden in Hank's room. No one else could have used it and placed it there. Hank's prints, and Hank's only, were on it.

Anthony laughed the shaving lotion to scorn. It had been in the bathroom earlier, he said, and he could have used it, or Jay could have, or Frank Newell.

The fact remained that it was she who had put a noose around Hank's neck.

Noose—Elizabeth shook and caught at the foot of the bed. But Jay was dead and nothing could bring him back. She realized then the ephemeral quality of all her later life. It was the Gryces who mattered, who were real and solid and enduring, the metal under the surface alloy.

She had seen Anthony for a moment after they took Hank away. She couldn't get through to him. He was remote, withdrawn, staring at distance, planning and arranging what to do for Hank, what lawyers to get.

"Go to sleep, darling. I'll see you in the morning." He went away.

Go to sleep—with Hank in the little jail down in the village, a toy jail with a steeple on it, and a cracked bell in the square tower below. Pictures of Hank, clear and sharp, passed across the surface of her mind. Hank coming home from college with a tall blond girl she and Anthony had instantly hated, Hank on the float at the lake, burnt cinnamon-colored, with drops of water beading his skin, Hank the day Anthony was married, keeping close to her, taking care of her, Hank a few hours earlier, tilting Scotch and soda in his square strong hand and telling her he loved her.

Vroonan was talking to someone in the hall. "All we need is the gun," he said, as he passed out of earshot.

THE gun. She had forgotten about it. Elizabeth jerked to a halt in the middle of the floor. The weariness and the confusion, the squeezing agony drew off a little. No matter what Hank had done he had to be saved.

She began to think, driven by a flaming urgency.

It was one o'clock by the time she decided what she must do. She went about her preparations quietly, so that Crilly shouldn't hear, no one should hear. She pulled on slacks and a shirt and tennis shoes and a sweater, tied a ribbon around her hair confiningly. There was a trooper in the downstairs hall. She opened her door, heard him cough, closed the door, relocked it.

The window—what had been done by others she could do herself. She climbed noiselessly over the sill, stood erect on the flattened curve of the shingles. Ordinarily she was afraid of heights. Fear had left her. She had no room for it. All her thought was fastened on a single goal.

The night was cool and clear. There was no moon but the stars were out and the air was clean and sharp. Something like exhilaration touched her in that slow careful progress above the dark gardens, along the rim of the great bowed roof. There was a bad corner where the other wing started. A drain pipe and some stout ropes of wisteria helped.

Anthony's light was on and his window open. He was fully dressed, sitting at a table, his head buried in his arms. If she had needed any further incentive the sight of the face he raised at her whisper would have provided it. He looked frightful.

"Elizabeth." He was beside her, was drawing her through the window, resting his tired head against her hair.

"Anthony, I'm going down there."

"Down where?"

"Down into the caverns. The gun—"

She didn't have to explain that if they couldn't find it, if it was never found, the police would have a hard time convicting Hank.

Anthony struck his forehead savagely. "Why didn't I think of that before? I've been going mad in here because there was nothing I could do. Now, tell me exactly where you hid it."

But she couldn't tell him. Those strange shapes below the earth's surface defied description. And there was a second obstacle.

In her innocence Elizabeth had thought that they could get into the building above the caverns, perhaps through a window, and go down the emergency staircase beside the elevator shaft.

Anthony said: "The police are there, camping in the lounge, ready to go to work tomorrow, but . . . Wait a minute!

I know another way in, if it's still open."

Hank was much more familiar with the caves than he was, but Hank wasn't there. The thing that troubled Anthony was Elizabeth's ability to make the journey.

"It's pretty rough going."

She swept his objections aside.

"You'll never find the gun without me. I can't tell you where it is, but once I'm down there, I'll recognize the spot."

FIVE minutes after she entered Anthony's room they left it together, by the same route. He was a different man, alert and vital and renewed. The drop from the eaves to the garden jarred them both a bit. They stood erect in darkness and listened.

There was no sound except the dry clacking of a tree toad and the song of the frogs in the valley below. A small wind stirred the little new leaves, and ruffled Elizabeth's hair. There were footsteps, slow and deliberate somewhere near, and someone whistled a tune, softly. It was one of the state troopers rounding the Inn.

They waited side by side, their feet digging into the soft earth, until the whistling receded.

"Now," Anthony murmured and took Elizabeth's hand.

Along the shrubbery and across a stretch of new lawn, not looking back, toward a belt of cedars and the kitchen garden.

There was no hue and cry behind them, and they made it safely. After that it was easier.

Up hill and out into open meadows where they had nothing to fear from the police. At the end of twenty minutes, half a mile from the Inn to the north and east, Anthony found the entrance to the caves after several false casts. It was in a clump of trees on a hillside, a hole in tumbled rocks, concealed by briars and vines.

Elizabeth realized with a feeling of awe that the caves had been there beneath them all along, dark, secret, immense, a labyrinth in stone running for miles below the peaceful, pastoral surface.

Anthony pulled vines aside and lowered himself into the hole. He reached up a hand, took hers. She slid down a short incline that leveled out, dived again.

"There's no danger here," Anthony said reassuringly. "This first bit's all right. Keep close behind me and watch my light."

Cold dank air blew up around them. Anthony started forward. Holding claustrophobic panic in check Elizabeth followed at his heels. . . .

Back at the Inn, at about the time Anthony and Elizabeth started into the caverns, Crilly Van Sant went into Elizabeth's room and found Elizabeth gone. She stood staring at the open window, pallid, and narrow-eyed, for a long moment.

Then she went into her own room and began to dress.

And in the town jail a little to the south, in the dingy corridor outside the single wretched cell, a trooper dozed peacefully, unaware of the removal of two rusty iron bars or that the cage he guarded was empty and that their bird had flown, a good half-hour earlier.

Hank Gryce reached the Inn less than five minutes after Elizabeth and Anthony left it. He, too, heard the trooper whistling, and he, too, waited. He had a gun in his pocket, his father's gun. The house at Coxsackie had been his first stop after he freed himself.

When the trooper retreated to a safe distance Hank called Anthony, softly. Getting no answer, he swung himself up, nimble as a big cat, and found the room empty and the door locked from the inside. Back on the ground again, he cautiously lit a match and saw footprints cleanly molded in the dark earth. After the first few minutes of trailing he knew where Anthony and Elizabeth had gone.

He got to his feet and began to run. . .

MEANWHILE, Anthony and Elizabeth were making progress. But

it was maddeningly slow. Elizabeth's slacks were torn and plastered with mud, her sweater was ripped, muddy hair tumbled into her eyes, as she slipped and slid and clambered after Anthony down and up and down again, over mountains of rocks and through seas of mud in the black windings of that underground world.

Anthony was in no better shape.

In some places they had to crawl on their hands and knees through jagged tunnels no larger than a sewer pipe. In others, vast spaces soared around them, unseen but felt, and they had to pick their footsteps in infinity.

Water was everywhere. Its slow drip folded in on them until it seemed like the beat of their own blood. The puny light of the torch woke terrifying shadows. There were huge piles of debris to negotiate, impeding obstacles to get around, pressing walls of clay to squeeze through. A half a dozen times Anthony had to stop and stare musingly.

"That turning? No, that leads south and we want to go north."

Once they had to wade through water three feet deep, and once Elizabeth stumbled and would have crashed over the edge of a cliff if Anthony hadn't caught her in time.

But she refused to consider turning back. She rubbed her shin ruefully, kicked lumps of clay from her sneakers.

"How much farther?"

"Not much," Anthony told her. "You are sure you're all right, Elizabeth?"

"Yes. I'm fine. Winded a little, that's all. We'd better hurry. Someone may discover we're gone."

It was all through her, a sense of urgency, of the need for haste, somehow captured from him.

At last they reached surroundings that were vaguely familiar and Anthony gave an exclamation of triumph. They were in the labyrinth where Dace had handed Crilly the letters. And then, almost at once, they were out in the great amphitheatre where the underground lake began—and where Dace had been killed.

CHAPTER VIII

PRIMITIVE terror grasped at Elizabeth as they passed into that place, a convulsive fear of the silence and the strangeness and the motionless black water, of the weird shapes advancing and retreating, with always, behind these things, the slow persistent drip-drip that was the only break in the listening stillness.

They moved along the wet brick walk in a small spot of illumination eaten into by the dark until they neared the steps, with the gondolas moored at the bottom. Anthony found the switch. But welcome as the light would have been Elizabeth said she didn't think it was safe to use the electricity. If the police were in the house at the top of the shaft, they might know that the electricity had been turned on and come to investigate.

"Smart child." Anthony gazed at her with bleak sockets for eyes in a face that was a skull lit from below. "You're right, of course. We'll have to manage with this." He swung the torch. "Here's the staircase. Where were you when you hid the gun?"

Elizabeth looked around at the spot where it had struck her ankle on its interrupted flight into the black water, at the flat wet platform, at its inner side. Stalagmites and clumps of flowstone, dozens of them scattered thickly in a small space.

She moved to and fro, concentrating, going back in memory. Presently she found the formation against which she had been leaning when the police arrived.

"This, I think. . . . Yes—this."

She paused beside a wave of solid rock with creviced sides pouring down in perpetual and arrested motion that was the work of uncounted centuries.

"I was standing with my back to it, like this, and the police were coming,

and I—" She put out her hand exploringly. "Here!" Her voice quickened with excitement.

The gun was there, down about four feet. Anthony's arm was too big and Elizabeth reached into the bottom of the fissure and drew out the gun. Gazing at the cold, heavy, deadly thing that had sent Dace into eternity and that had, indirectly, put that white scarf around Jay's neck, the first doubt touched her. Suppose Hank hadn't killed Dace. Suppose someone else's fingerprints were on it.

How could she and Anthony know? They couldn't.

She looked at Anthony, but he was looking past her into the solid wall of blackness beyond the reach of the torch, looking and listening, his face white, strained.

Elizabeth's heart began to pound. "What is it?" she whispered, crowding against the railing at the head of the steps for support.

They mustn't be found here. The gun mustn't be found. The lake had already been searched. It was the one safe place. But the handle would have to be wiped clean.

Fingerprints, she thought confusedly, would resist water.

"Give it to me, Elizabeth." Anthony was close to her. He spoke quickly, looking over his shoulder. He was drawing a folded handkerchief from his pocket.

He shook folds of whiteness out. And suddenly Elizabeth knew. Terribly, deafeningly, even before the faint odor confined in the folds of the handkerchief was freed. She knew because of Anthony's face, his eyes, the queer glittering fixity of them, wild, hungry, unrestrained, without moorings.

THE odor was the odor she had caught when she had been smothered in the quilt thrown over her in her bedroom in the Inn. It was the odor that had hung on the motionless air near Jay's swinging body. Hank hadn't shot Dace and strangled Jay.

Anthony had.

Anthony, who stood not three feet from her, looking at her queerly, intently, with those dreadful and revealing eyes.

And she was alone in the caves with Anthony, down there deep in the earth, and no one knew where she was!

He was going to take the gun from her. He was going to take the gun from her and wipe the fingerprints off. His fingerprints. He mustn't. Her arm flashed up. Before she could throw the gun, he leaped. As he did, she struck out at him and the torch fell from his hand, and darkness closed down on them and on the caves and the water—everything—vanished.

Elizabeth jumped back instinctively. She was clear of the rail. She stood poised in blackness, holding her breath and listening.

Where was Anthony? Was he creeping toward her, feeling for her with outstretched hands? He was near. Terribly near.

He spoke from somewhere quite close. His voice was soft, low, unhurried, almost caressing.

"You know, Elizabeth. . . Yes, you know. I won't hurt you, darling. Come to me. Don't be afraid. Elizabeth, I love you. Where are you? . . . Elizabeth." His voice rose.

She moved back blindly, hit the railing with her thigh, broke away from it, collided with rock. Blood streamed down her forehead, wet and warm. Her ankle twisted under her. She staggered erect, dodged around bulk in the blackness, tripped, recovered herself, and began to run.

And all the time Anthony was near her, talking and talking, coaxing, pleading.

"Elizabeth, I did it for you. I had to kill Dace. . . . Don't run, darling, you can't get away. No Elizabeth, you can't get away."

He found the torch. And light came on, sudden, blinding. The light found her where she crouched, in a shivering huddle in the mouth of a little gully with the wall at her back. He had the gun.

It was in his hand. He was coming toward her.

Elizabeth didn't recognize her own screams, high, light, pealing to the unseen roof. She only knew they stopped, and that she was in Anthony's arms and that his lips were pressed burningly, hatefully, on hers, and that she was going to die.

All at once the end of it came. There were lights and voices and shouts and running feet. She didn't know that her screams had guided the searchers. A bullet smacked somewhere and the echoes rolled again, as they had rolled a million years ago when Dace was shot in that same place.

After the first moment Elizabeth didn't hear any more.

Her knees folded and she slid down into a tumbled heap. . . .

* * * * *

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Miss Chandler?"

"No, thank you, nurse, I don't think so." Elizabeth stopped staring at the wall and smiled mechanically.

The trained nurse left the big dim room on the first floor of the hospital at Coxsackie. June was outside the shaded windows. More than a month had passed since the night in the Persephone Caverns.

Elizabeth had been very ill. One ankle had been broken and her shoulder fractured. The bones were knitting. It was her mind that refused to mend. Not that she wasn't perfectly sane, because she was—too sane. But nothing mattered.

SHE knew most of what had happened. Anthony was dead. He had killed himself with the gun with which he had shot Dace. She knew, too, that Crilly had searched for her, foreboding-ly, on that distant night, but that it was Hank who had saved her.

The footprints in the earth outside the Inn had told him she and Anthony were together. Hank had tracked them far enough to guess where they were going, had raced for the caves, knocking down an astonished trooper who got in his way. Crilly had joined him. They had been only just in time.

As far as the bottle of shaving lotion that had caused Hank's arrest went, Anthony's use of it was habitual. It disappeared rapidly, Hank had thought nothing of it. But when Elizabeth had spoke of it after she found Jay, Anthony had hidden it in a linen closet in the Inn. Hank had seen him, had retrieved the bottle and concealed it in his own room, preparatory to destroying it.

It was all over. Crilly was married. The affair at Coxsackie had received little publicity and the Newells had graciously given their consent. Hank was in Japan.

It was Elizabeth's listlessness that worried her doctor. Visitors were asking for her. They wouldn't do her any good in the shape she was in. He had had a heart to heart talk with Vroonan the night before.

The doctor was right. It was the thought that she was to blame for everything that had happened that was sapping Elizabeth's strength. She told herself that she was directly responsible for three deaths, Dace's and Jay's and Anthony's, because Anthony had loved her too much. Poor Jay. Another bitterness added itself to her grief and remorse. She knew too late that she had never really loved Anthony. Her feeling for him had been a transference, in self-defense. It was Hank she had always loved, Hank the aloof, the unattainable. And forever, now, Hank must hate her for what she had done to his brother.

The door opened. The nurse had spoken earlier of visitors. Elizabeth raised heavy eyes. What faint color she had drained away. She shrank back against her pillows. Vroonan was walking into the room. He wasn't alone.

Hank was with him, big and distinguished in his summer whites, and tanned by the sun.

He came quietly to the foot of the bed. His eyes were somber, and he was thinner. He greeted her gently, asked how

she was. His ship was in drydock and he had a week's leave. He had come to Coxsackie to sign some papers.

Vroonan took over then, and Hank went to stand at the window, his back to the room. The Captain began to talk. He talked briskly, and for some time. Understanding what he said came slowly to Elizabeth. But gradually it began to penetrate.

She was wrong, entirely wrong. Anthony hadn't killed his wife because of her. He had killed Dace for the most cogent of all reasons—money. Maida Fallon's money. On the morning they descended into the caves a telegram had arrived from Arizona. Anthony had taken it. It said that Maida was sinking rapidly.

Anthony called the Fallon ranch and was informed that Maida had just died. He realized two things. Dace was Maida Fallon's sole beneficiary, and with Maida's death, Dace would do what she had been afraid of doing before because of the old lady's principles—she would divorce him, and take herself and her money elsewhere.

He'd had to act at once.

Having killed Dace, Anthony had found that one murder wasn't enough. He had seen Dace pass something to Crilly in the caverns; he had heard from Hank of Elizabeth's stuffing papers into her pocket in Crilly's room. He had managed to get the letters from Elizabeth—and their contents had been a staggering blow. Dace and Jay Sergeant had been secretly married years earlier, when Dace was eighteen.

The marriage had lasted only a short time. No one had known about it. Unfortunately, Dace had neglected to get a divorce before marrying Anthony publicly, later on. Two weeks before Dace had died, finding herself in a financial jam, and knowing of Jay's engagement to Elizabeth, she had written to Jay demanding a thousand dollars, or else.

CRILLY had taken hold there. She pointed out that if Dace's aunt objected to divorce, she would object still more to bigamy, and, not trusting Dace, had demanded Jay's revealing correspondence back.

Dace had given in.

As far as Anthony was concerned, with the revelation of the letters, Jay had to die. He had already begun preparations for a quiet divorce, but he was still legally Dace's husband—and beneficiary.

Crilly had concealed the truth after Jay's death because she hadn't wanted it to interfere with her own marriage.

Vroonan continued to go into whys and wherefores. Elizabeth no longer listened. A crushing and terrible weight had rolled away, letting her breathe again and think, and feel.

She said in a whisper, out of a pause: "I thought—it was because Anthony loved me that—"

At the window Hank spoke without turning. "Things came too easily to Anthony all his life. He never really learned to love anyone but himself." His voice was sorrowful, there was infinite compassion in it. He had suffered, was still suffering.

After a moment he went on, looking out into the green fountain of a beach tree: "I've come to say good-by, Elizabeth. You'll be going back to New York soon, to your friends."

Elizabeth's heart began to beat again, warmly, after the long lull.

"Hank," she said, "I have a question to ask you."

Hank didn't turn. "A question? Go ahead."

Elizabeth did, the love that had always been there, that she had held back unconsciously, that she had fastened on a lesser man, no longer denied.

"Hank, later on, when we've had a chance to forget, if you meant what you said that day in the bar—will you marry me?"

There was silence in the room for a moment. Then Hank said, "Later on—hell!" and swung.

Vroonan fell over a chair on the way out and barked his shins. Neither of the other two heard him.

HAND IN HAND WITH *Murder*

Nora brought the club down

Norman A. Daniels

Nora Bradford plans a crime that fools the police, the insurance company, and a pair of confidence men—but not herself!

NORA BRADFORD was thirty-eight, looked thirty and dressed like eighteen. Usually her perfume was doused on in liberal enough quantities to obscure any other odors—but not here. Not in this white-tiled, chilly and grim place.

She was willowy and tall with high cheek bones and what Oswald Bradford used to call "almond eyes." She wore her hair sleekly piled high and it showed no trace of the dye. When she and Oswald were married, it had been a dark brown. Now it was blonde, very, very blonde. It looked surprisingly well on her. She had nice legs and knew it.

At first glance a man might be attracted to Nora Bradford, but a longer and second look would make most of them sigh and turn away. Nora was hard-boiled beneath the lipstick, powder and rouge. It came right through the paint.

Right now she wasn't feeling too hard-boiled. There was a strong hand gripping her elbow, supporting her.

Then she saw the man lying on the table. Things began to rock terribly, as though a transparent but still visible series of ocean waves were between her and the corpse.

"Yes," she said, with a swift intake of breath. "Yes, that's Oswald. That is my husband."

Then she had closed her eyes, opened her mouth slackly and fainted dead away.

It wasn't the first time Nora Bradford had lied.

Outside, in the morgue office, Lieutenant Forsythe who said he was attached to Homicide, waited until Nora drank the jigger of brandy. Then he took out a notebook.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Bradford. These things happen. Your husband darted into traffic, between two trucks. His features were—I'm sorry—quite unrecognizable. Therefore may I ask what you based your identification on?"

Her eyes were suddenly hard through the tears veiling them. But she quickly looked down at the floor. She knew how her eyes looked at times like this and she catered to them.

"Lieutenant," she said softly, "I was married to Oswald for eleven years. Eleven short years. Blissful, yes, and they should not have ended so soon, nor this way. I would know my husband if he—if he didn't have a head at all."

"Naturally." Forsythe was very patient, still poising that notebook. "But there must have been something to make you so positive."

"His clothing for one thing. Oh, can't you understand any wife would be certain? She'd feel it—here."

Nora pressed a hand above her heart and was sure she looked tragic. Forsythe nodded.

"Yes, of course. We identified him by the wallet in his possession. Perhaps you could tell us what was inside. . . ."

"His draft card—4F he was. Then a lodge card, my picture, about thirty-five dollars and—and two theatre stubs to the Embassy. Oswald always saved the stubs for a long time and we were at the theatre only last Wednesday."

Forsythe snapped the notebook shut. "That does it, Mrs. Bradford. The wallet will be turned over to you later. Thanks for coming down. I know how unpleasant it must have been. I'll have you sent home in a service car."

"No! No—please," Nora amended her first snapping negative. "I'd rather walk. I need time to—time to think. There are so many things. My whole life has changed so. . . ."

"Very well, Mrs. Bradford. Just sign the release for the body and send your undertaker."

She scrawled her name on some form and hurried out of there. When she was certain that nosy detective lieutenant couldn't see her, she hailed a taxi and gave her home address. It was most essential that she get there before Oswald returned.

For Nora Bradford was scheming murder. The idea had occurred to her as she rode beside Lieutenant Forsythe to the morgue. Perhaps it would be Oswald, lying dead there. She'd be lucky then. But if it wasn't, and if Forsythe was correct about the mutilated features, she could say it was Oswald. If things went wrong, she could easily retract her identification. They didn't put people in jail for such errors.

NORA'S scheme was simple and based upon simple motives. She wanted money and if Oswald died accidentally, she'd get it. She'd get ten thousand dollars. But Oswald had to be made to see reason.

She found the house dark and knew he hadn't reached home yet. She peered up the street for signs of him. Luckily he was tight-fisted enough to walk the two miles from the end of the subway line. But fares added up to too much a week and Oswald believed in holding onto his money. Nora could wheedle some out of him, though after eleven years the wheedling had become a definite bore.

She paid the cab driver and, for effect, began sobbing slightly as she turned to walk up the path to the white cottage. The cab pulled away. Nora

picked up speed and again looked down the street. There wasn't a soul on it. Nobody would see Oswald when he walked home. There were few houses and the street was dead end.

Inside, she turned on lights and pulled down the curtains. Then she threw her hat and the silver fox scarf on a chair. She sneered at the silver fox. That had been Oswald's latest gesture, but she'd wanted a jacket. Now she meant to get one.

The house was much too large for two people. She'd often thought about taking in roomers except for all the work they involved. Oswald's parents had lived here for years, but their former presence did little to make the dwelling attractive to Nora.

She walked the floor nervously, trying to think of ways by which she might persuade Oswald. He could be the stubbornest man on the face of the earth sometimes. It wouldn't do to come out with it bluntly. To tell him he was legally dead. She'd have to break the deal gently and keep emphasizing the ten thousand dollars.

Suddenly she stopped her pacing. If he knew she'd get ten thousand because he was willing to vanish, he'd want all but twenty dollars of it. And see that she paid it over, too. She wondered why these problems hadn't occurred to her before.

She thought back to the several times she'd pondered murder. Those moments had been coming more and more frequently of late, because she was thoroughly sick of Oswald. But kill him? How—and get away with it? A corpse cannot simply be dropped off by some wayside. Rivers, lakes and even oceans refused to hold them. Any makeshift grave is a nervous grave, apt to disgorge its contents to the slightest curiosity.

But Oswald was already dead. His body would be decently buried and she could weep over it. Oswald was dead. This man who would be coming home to her was just a nobody. In a big city, pictures of the unknown dead are never publicized.

She heard him coming then with his mincing, hard little steps. Along the sidewalk, up the path and the stairs and across the porch. His key rattled in the door and Oswald came in. He saw nothing unusual, kissed Nora somewhere midway between the middle of the jaw and the left ear, hung up his hat and ambled straight into the dining room. He stared in utter disbelief at the barren table.

"Nora, what in the world . . ." he began.

"I—just got home, Oswald," she said. "The—police were here. They—wanted me to look at a corpse. They thought it was you. Isn't that strange? They really thought the man was you."

"Oh, they did!" Oswald bristled. "Well, I can tell you why. A pickpocket stole my wallet today. I shall go to the police and get it back—"

"But there was nothing in the wallet except your draft card," Nora lied. "Anyway I promised to bring you down to see a detective tomorrow. We'll straighten it all out. Oswald, wouldn't it be funny if they insisted the dead man was you? Think what would happen. You'd be dead, but not dead. I wonder what the insurance company would do I if put in a claim?"

"Send you to prison where you'd belong," Oswald declared with a finality that indicated he'd heard quite enough of the subject. "They have trained and shrewd investigators. Or didn't you know?"

She nodded blankly. At least she realized Oswald's nerves would hardly be up to carrying out such a scheme. She went to the kitchen and started dinner. She heard the springs of the ancient divan creak. Oswald was going to get his beauty nap before dinner instead of after. She knelt to open one of the low cabinets in search of a pan. Directly before her was the sawed-off baseball bat which Oswald had once prepared when burglars were terrorizing the area.

It was, according to Oswald, just as good a weapon as a gun and you didn't have to buy bullets.

SHE took the club out, her lips pursed, and put it behind her back. Then she walked into the dining room from where she could see Oswald dozing, stretched out to his full length of five feet four and a half. His eyes were closed.

Suddenly all his faults loomed up in her mind. The lazy tightwad—he'd never washed a dish or helped with dinner since they'd been married. He howled every time the roast wasn't tender, even though he refused to pay enough to get a good piece of meat. He often brought home soggy vegetables from some city stand where he'd picked them up, cheap, just before they were due to be thrown away.

She walked up to him and without any hesitation lifted the club. She brought it down. Oswald never uttered a sound. His eyes sprang open once. Just once.

There wasn't too much blood. The lack of it really surprised her. She seized the edge of the too small rug and pulled it back before she rolled him off the divan. The blood on the wooden floor could be washed off easily. He was quite dead—she made certain of that.

Her hands were steady as she rolled him into an old, thin carpet which had been in the cellar for more than forty years—according to Oswald. She was glad to get rid of it—and him too.

The garage was attached to the house so that it was only necessary to drag Oswald across the floor, down three steps and over to the battered old car. Getting him on the floor of the back seat was something else, but she managed somehow.

Fifty minutes later she drove the relic into one of the big city parks. It was dark now and there'd be few people in the secluded sections because of the muggings and holdups which had taken place here after dark. In a favorable spot, she dragged him out, unrolled the old carpet and arranged him in a position which indicated he had been attacked. She turned two of his pockets inside out.

There were no laundry marks on any of the clothing. She'd made certain of that. Not one thing on him could be used for identification purposes and she had known for a long time that he'd never been fingerprinted. She surveyed her handiwork without too many qualms and then got back into the car. She drove straight home, but in crossing the river on the way, she dropped the ancient rug overside. It would either sink or soon become an unrecognizable bit of debris.

Home once more, she cleaned up rapidly. The police, even if they used their scientific tricks on every floor of the house, wouldn't find any traces of blood. This done, she sat down at the phone and asked for long distance.

"Paul?" She recognized the squawky voice of Oswald's older brother. "This is Nora. I've some bad news. Oswald was killed late this afternoon by a truck. . . ."

Paul said something and she asked him to repeat it.

"No, Paul, I don't need any money. Just some moral support from Oswald's loved ones. Did he what? Leave anything? Well—I think there is some insurance and a little cash in the bank. He made no will if that's what you mean."

Paul and all the others came. Aunt Margaret insisted that the sealed casket be opened. It was and Aunt Margaret promptly fainted dead away, but proclaimed that she knew poor Oswald no matter what they'd done to him.

Oswald's boss came the night before the funeral, with a check for a month's pay.

"He was almost ready to take his two weeks' vacation anyway," he said magnanimously. Nora thought he was a heel, but she did like the way he eyed her. Oswald should have brought her to the office long ago.

It went smoothly. Nora shed just the proper amount of tears and was called marvelously brave. The insurance agent came and settled the claim. In a week's time she was handed a check for ten thousand dollars. There was a brief

item in most newspapers about the discovery of a murdered man in the park and a few days later a note that he had not been identified.

THAT was all there was to it until two weeks after the funeral. The doorbell had been giving Nora a mild case of the jitters every time it rang, but now she remained poised and calm. There was a man standing on the porch beside two suitcases. He was about Nora's age, well groomed and smiling pleasantly. She liked him at first sight.

"My name is Mark Edwin," he said. "I was told that you might have a room for rent. I'm willing to pay whatever your price is because I have to stay in town for several months and there's nowhere—"

"Oh, but I'm sorry," Nora said. "You see my husband died a short time ago and I am here alone. It wouldn't be exactly proper—"

"Hold on." Mark Edwin smiled and she liked that smile. "My sister Judith will be here with me. She might even prove a pleasant companion to you, Mrs. —Mrs.—" His eyes darted to the doorbell and the name above it. "Mrs. Bradford. I— Oswald Bradford! Are you Oswald's widow?"

"Why, yes! Did you know him, Mr. Edwin?"

"He originally came from Plainfield, didn't he? He has a brother Paul and a lot of other brothers and sisters . . ."

"Yes—yes, that's right."

"Well, I'll be darned! Oswald and I attended high school together. We were going to the same college. We'd made all our plans, but he decided to go to work. I went on alone. I'm an engineer now . . ."

"I'm so glad to know an old friend of poor Oswald." Nora patted the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief. "I wish I could accommodate you and your sister—"

"We'll pay twenty-five dollars a week each," Edwin broke in. "That was what we'd have to pay at the hotel if they'd let us in."

Fifty dollars a week! Nora wondered how long she'd been missing a racket like this. She stepped aside and asked him in. They chatted and she gave him some dry sherry. She'd have much preferred a whiskey sour, but she felt she didn't know Edwin quite well enough. He made a phone call and Judith promised to taxi right out.

Edwin told Nora about Oswald's more youthful days and many of these stories she'd heard from Oswald himself. Then Judith arrived, a middle-aged, capable looking woman. She was slightly overweight, and didn't care. She smoked expensive cigarettes, smelled of expensive perfumes and liked whiskey sours. Moreover, she had two bottles of the best in her suitcase.

It turned out to be a very fine arrangement. In the first place Nora couldn't find a buyer for the house who would meet her price and she hated living there alone. There was too much of Oswald lingering around the place. Now the sedate old house rang with the laughter and gayety of the Edwins. Her kitchen cabinet was well stocked with their liquor. Edwin brought her candy and sometimes two bouquets of flowers. One for sister Judy, the other for Nora. It was all very nice indeed. Oswald became nothing but a pleasant memory.

Each day Edwin went out to work. He was employed at the Merritt Mills and had a very good job. Judith slept late, helped around the house, then always went out afternoons and rarely returned before ten. Edwin was home much earlier. Gradually, Nora began to acquire new ideas about this tall, slender, black-haired man. He was everything that Oswald hadn't been. Kind, gracious, helpful and above all, nice looking.

And he wasn't after her money. She knew that. Each week he promptly paid her fifty dollars and flashed a thick roll of bills. He must have a very good job indeed, she decided.

He asked her to marry him three weeks to the day after he and Judith had walked in. Nora let him kiss her and found it interesting. But she'd sensed this coming and given it some

thought. She didn't dare risk marrying so quickly after Oswald's death. There was bound to be gossip and she wanted no repercussions. Things had gone too smoothly for that.

"You have grown on me," she admitted to him. "I've come to like you very much, Mark, and Judith is a perfect darling. But Oswald has been dead such a short time. . . ."

"I know," Edwin said in his kindly manner. "I was a fool to have even broached the subject. I can wait, Nora. I can wait a lifetime for someone like you. Just so long as I think there may be a faint ray of hope."

She colored beautifully and fussed with her hair.

"Mark—you may have considerable hope. Perhaps in a year. . . ."

HE KISSED her again. It was even more interesting than the first kiss. But strangely enough in the days that followed, he came home later and later. He brought no more little gifts though he was as attentive as ever. He took to working at Oswald's old desk until very late at night. He was far behind at the plant.

Nora didn't mind. She decided she could handle two more boarders and planned to run an ad soon. She spent her time cleaning up the other rooms. There were any number of replies to her ads and several prospective roomers came in person. But they all balked at twenty-five dollars a week for a room in this outlying area.

Nora began wondering why the Edwins were so willing to pay that sum and nobody else was. After all, the plant was at least five miles away. Even Judith had to spend a small fortune on cabs because she detested subways. The first bits of suspicion began to grow in Nora's mind.

They were both late in coming home this evening and Nora entered Judith's room. She prowled the bureau drawers, the clothes closet and the suitcases under the bed. She was very careful about it, being certain nothing was noticeably disturbed. But Nora was. Tucked in a corner of one suitcase, rolled up in a handkerchief, were two rings. One was a wedding band, the other a diamond. Judith's, of course, but she never hinted that she was or had been married. Nora frowned over this find, as she put it back.

There wasn't time to search Mark's room that night, but she did go to Oswald's desk which Mark had adopted. She heard him coming up the path and got away from the desk quickly. He was alone and he gratefully accepted a cup of coffee.

"You know," he said, "a wealthy widow like you shouldn't live alone. This is too far out. And, Nora, I hope you don't keep a lot of money in that old safe I noticed in the study."

"Well I—" Nora stopped abruptly. "I don't, of course. Just enough to pay household bills. No, I believe firmly in banks, Mr. Edwin."

"Call me Mark," he suggested. "You used to. Remember? I'm glad about the cash."

Nora did keep a lot of money in the safe. Ten thousand dollars of it, to be exact. It was just a precaution in case she heard any news about the police hanging around. If she had to run for it, she didn't intend to go without the ten thousand dollars.

But even more important—and dangerous—was another item secreted in that safe. The club she'd used to knock Oswald's brains out. The cheap, unvarnished wood seemed to have absorbed his blood. She hadn't dared leave it exposed, and getting rid of the thing was dangerous. As soon as cooler weather set in, when smoke from her chimney wouldn't be regarded suspiciously, she'd burn the thing in the furnace.

That night she slept badly. Following nights were equally rough on her nerves. That was why she was awake very late one night, sitting by the window and thinking of what she'd do with her ten thousand very soon now. She saw Mark and Judith get out of a cab together. They both looked at the darkened house and then Mark kissed her.

It was no sisterly kiss. She snuggled close to him and stayed there for two or three minutes. Nora heard a giggle and they separated. She heard them enter.

Nora tiptoed to her bed and slid beneath the covers. They came upstairs and paused outside her room. Her door was ajar as usual, to create some minor sort of a draft, and now it opened even wider. Mark looked in, nodding his head in satisfaction. He whispered hoarsely and Nora heard every word.

"She's sound asleep. But keep your door open anyway and listen. If she stirs, drop something. I want another look at that old safe."

Nora's blood froze. The warm air of the room seemed suddenly as cold as an Arctic winter. Mark had made love to her so she wouldn't throw him out. Judith was either his wife or his sweetheart. The kiss proved that, the rings in Judith's traveling bags were further proof. Why were they here then? Nora had to know.

She didn't sleep a wink. After half an hour Mark came upstairs and she heard two doors close gently. Three hours later she slipped downstairs to the study. The safe seemed to be quite intact. She opened it. The door squealed a little and made her shiver. But the money was there and the sawed-off baseball bat was right in place.

THE next evening Mark came home very early. She had trained herself to show none of the suspicions which beset her. She even offered him dinner, and he accepted.

"I've got to go back to the plant tonight," he said. "Most important. Too much work. I remember Oswald—he liked too much work. Even when he went in for sports he played the game too hard. Never amounted to much because he was so light, but he tried everything. I recall how he made the freshman team and stuck his chest way out to there. But in the first play they smeared him so badly his leg was broken. They had to put a silver fitting in place of some bone."

"Yes," Nora said. "Yes, he told me several times about that. The leg used to bother him when the weather was inclement." She picked up empty plates and carried them toward the kitchen. Over her shoulder, she said, "You two must have had a lot of fun. It was the business branch of the high school you attended together, wasn't it? They had a very good course. Oswald became an excellent bookkeeper."

"That's right." Mark sipped his coffee and leaned back to enjoy the first puff on one of his fragrant cigars. "I was sorry I took the business course later, because I had to do a year of prep school after graduation to get the necessary points for college, but I made it. Yes sir, those were the good old days."

They must have been, Nora thought savagely, when she was in the kitchen. Because there'd been no business section of that high school and Oswald had bemoaned the fact a thousand times since she'd known him. Mark Edwin knew a great deal about Oswald, but he'd slipped on the business school episode.

At six-thirty Mark left for the plant. Nora followed him to the door. She almost called him back for his mail. It was one of those letters he'd been receiving off and on. She actually had the envelope in her hand when he turned. She hastily put it behind her back.

"I'll wait up for Judith," she smiled winningly. "Perhaps if you come home early enough, we'll have a drink or two."

"Right you are," he declared. "I'll make a point of it."

After he'd gone, Nora hastened into the kitchen and put on the kettle. When it began to steam she put the envelope in its path until the glue softened. She was very careful about this. It was no time to make a mistake.

She extracted a single sheet of paper and the heading made her senses reel. This was from the insurance company which had covered Oswald and paid off the ten thousand dollars.

The letter itself was very brief, without address or signature. It was merely typed in a few lines.

"Ten thousand paid April 30th. Check cleared bank and was presented for cash. She must have the money. Will keep you advised if anything develops here."

She worked swiftly, not giving way to her outraged nerves at all. But when the letter was back in the envelope and the flap sealed and pressed flat under the light touches of an iron, she began to tremble.

They were after her. They knew! Mark and Judith were insurance detectives. Maybe they had guessed evidence of some sort was secreted in the safe. She had to get rid of that club at once. She hurried to the study, but her hands shook so badly that she missed the combination three times. Then the tumblers clicked and a second later her doorbell rang.

She jumped in sudden terror, but thought clearly enough to spin the combination again and lock the safe. She hurried to the front door. It was probably Judith. She mustn't betray the state of her nerves. She'd fool them. When they retired, she'd take the club out and destroy it. She'd hide the money elsewhere and then tell them she intended to close up the house.

After all, what could they do? If they had any evidence, she'd have been arrested by now. They weren't getting any place in their investigation. She could win out if she kept her nerve. Judith must notice nothing wrong. Nora picked up a cigarette as she passed through the living room. She lit it and let the bell ring again.

Then she opened the door and stared in sudden horror at Lieutenant Forsythe of the Homicide Squad! For once she was glad she wore a dress and not pajamas. He couldn't see her knees shake.

FORSYTHE took off his hat, smiled and bowed slightly.

"Good evening, Mrs. Bradford. It's nice to see you again—under more pleasant circumstances."

"How—how do you do." She offered her hand uncertainly. "I'm sorry if I act nervous. The last time you came it was with terrible news. . . ."

He grinned widely then. "This time I merely want to see Mr. Edwin. I understand he boards with you."

"Yes—he does." She was getting more panicky by the second. "But he isn't home. Neither is Judith, his sister. Mr. Edwin said he wouldn't be back until late."

"Oh—I see." Forsythe put his hat back on. "Well, I'll look in later perhaps. Ah—if you don't mind, please say nothing about my visit. I want to surprise him. You know, old friends and such."

"Oh, of—of course," she agreed. He stalked off and she closed the door. Then she collapsed into a chair. So they'd even brought Forsythe in. That meant they knew or strongly suspected something. It meant the contents of the safe had to be removed at once. She sped back to the study.

Before she reached it, Judith rang the bell. She knew the ring. It was always two short and one long. A signal that she'd not have to fancy up her face. Nora wished she had a drink. A dozen drinks. She let Judith in.

"Isn't Mark home yet?" Judith drew off her black gloves. "I'm very glad his job ends soon. We'll be leaving in a few days, Nora. I imagine you'll be glad to see us go."

"Oh no. I mean—well, I'm going to sell the house, Judith. It's too much for me. There was a buyer here just a few minutes ago. A man named George Forsythe. He thought he might know Mark and you."

"George Forsythe?" Judith shook her head. "No, he's a stranger to me."

"Well, he was only guessing," Nora said tightly. "How about a drink, darling?"

They had three apiece and Nora began to feel a little better. She excused herself, went upstairs to the attic and attacked some of Oswald's old trunks. In one she found an ancient, but still efficient, revolver. It was fully loaded and ready for business.

She carried it downstairs, put it into her knitting bag and carried the bag to

the living room where Judith was mixing another brace of drinks. If Judith and Mark tried anything tonight, they'd get a surprise.

Nora forced herself to put on an exhibition of knitting. Judith read the evening paper, completely r e l a x e d. Nora's thoughts ran riot. They were going to close in. She could feel it. Forsythe had been tipped to stand by. Perhaps he'd return later, after Mark got home, and the fireworks would begin. Nora didn't intend to be here then.

Mark came home at ten-fifteen. Nora gave him no chance to talk with Judith alone.

"Mark," she said, "I told Judith a man called here tonight about buying the house. He thought he knew you. His name was George Forsythe."

Mark looked a trifle startled. He knew Forsythe all right.

"I'm sorry, the name doesn't ring true, Nora. Of course I've met a lot of people professionally and I'm very poor at remembering names."

Nora dipped a hand into the knitting bag and closed fingers around the gun.

"Perhaps it would refresh your memory if I told you George Forsythe was a detective lieutenant."

Mark gave a visible start this time. He picked up a drink, downed it neat and moved over beside Judith. Twice he whispered something to her and she shook her head slightly. The third time she assented, though reluctantly. Nora held the gun, ready to yank it out.

Mark said, "Nora, I've some very important papers. I got them too late to put in the bank. I wonder if I might have the use of your safe."

"No, you may not," Nora snapped.

"But just for tonight, Nora. Really, it's a favor I know, but—"

"You will not use my safe, Mr. Edwin. Not tonight, nor any night."

JUDITH got to her feet slowly. Her face was slightly pink and there was no longer any of that good humor in her eyes.

"Fred—make her open it," she said. "I'm sick of this."

Mark, who also answered to the name of Fred, it seemed, whirled on Nora and approached with angry face and both arms outstretched. Nora dropped the knitting bag and the gun leveled.

"Stay where you are—both of you," she snapped. "I know exactly what you are and why you are here. I know why Forsythe came too. Don't move. Mark—or whatever your name is—don't take another step. I'll shoot. . . ."

"Put that gun down, you fool," Mark snarled. "Have you gone crazy, Nora. Put that gun down."

She backed up a step. "I'll shoot," she warned. "You're not so smart. I know all about you. Oh, yes—you were very well acquainted with Oswald. Very well, indeed. From facts you dug up in the town where he came from. Nice little items, like the silver plate in his leg. But you muffed on more important things."

"Fred—she's wise," Judith cried in sudden alarm.

The man sprang toward Nora. The gun exploded with a roar that shook the whole house. Mark stopped in his tracks and slowly put both hands against his stomach. There was a very silly expression on his face. He coughed, opened his mouth and tried to talk. No words came. A little blood did. Judith let out a shrill scream.

"Go ahead and yell," Nora told her. "What difference does it make now? Nobody will hear you. Why—I ought to kill you, too! Spying on me this way! Acting like stool pigeons for that insurance company! Well, you won't get me or the insurance or anything else!"

"Mrs. Bradford," a voice spoke mildly behind her back. "Put down the gun. I'd hate to shoot a woman as attractive as you. But I will. Put the gun down."

Nora turned. Lieutenant Forsythe stood in the doorway, an ugly service pistol trained on her. For one split second she considered taking a chance and shooting it out, but something in Forsythe's eyes told her she'd never make it. Mark was beginning to moan and sink into a chair. She didn't want

to risk that sort of thing. The gun fell from her hand.

Forsythe picked it up. He took handcuffs from his pocket and put one loop around Nora's wrist. Then he pulled her toward Judith, who stood transfixed. Forsythe cuffed Judith too.

"Well, well, Mary, you really tried to do it up brown this time," he said to Judith. "You're within reach of the phone. Dial headquarters and tell them to send an ambulance. Also the paddy wagon. The one we use for ladies. It's cream colored inside."

Nora tried to bluff it out. "Lieutenant, these two were going to rob me—"

"Sure," Forsythe grinned. "I heard it all. The window was open a little and I just happened to be staked out under the tree waiting until Fred and Mary came home. I have a warrant for their arrest, but I figured they might take you and then I'd have a local charge too. The warrant is a fugitive paper. They gypped another widow out of her insurance money six months ago. You were next on their list."

Nora clawed with a free hand at the back of a chair.

"But I thought—I thought—"

"Sure. You thought they were a pair of insurance dicks. You shouted something about your husband having a silver plate in his leg. Funny thing, but the body of a murdered man found in a park had a silver plate in the right leg. The guy you identified as Oswald didn't have such a plate. I'm just wondering if we exhumed them both—"

Nora screamed, "You're fooling me! These are insurance detectives. Mark received a letter this afternoon. I opened it. It came from the insurance company and told about my receiving money—"

Forsythe whistled softly. "Nice going, Nora. We figured these two had a plant in the insurance company offices. Somebody who tipped them when a poor lonesome widow received a lot of dough. Mark usually married them before he lit out. But you kept your dough in the safe and marrying you wouldn't get it out."

"But they are detectives!" Nora insisted. Nothing else would enter her brain.

"They happen to be a couple of high class con people. Smart operators with a lot of patience. But dangerous too, Nora. You're very lucky I was close by. Or were you? We can't do any more to this pair than put them in jail, but you —why, maybe you murdered your husband. And that safe—you were so set on their not getting into it! I imagine the contents will be very interesting. Sit down, ladies. The wagon won't get here for a few minutes. It's a lovely evening. A very lovely evening."

MYSTERY HEADLINERS IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE LADY IN QUESTION
A Complete Detective Novel by WILL OURSLER

THE WRONG ENVELOPE
A Lieutenant Trant Novelet by Q. PATRICK

THE CORPSE IN THE CABANA

ROBERT C. DENNIS

Kenny Selton takes a job as a barman to escape scandal but it crops up again when he has the key to a mystery!

THE GIRL said, "I'll have another stinger, please, Kenny."

She said my name as if she liked the sound of it. She knew it from hearing some of my regular customers use it. I didn't know her name. I took her empty glass, but didn't say anything.

Anyone drinking more than one of the Tamiami's stingers was either trying to get de-sensitized or needed some liquid courage. This was the girl's third drink in the ten minutes since I'd come on duty, but she wasn't the lush type. On previous occasions she had always drunk cokes. Maybe she had a bad moment before her; I didn't know. It was none of my business.

She watched me all the while I mixed

the drink. When I set it in front of her she gave me a tremulous smile as if she expected me to scold her. Her eyes were big and dark blue and her face was small and pointed. She had a million-dollar complexion. Her hair was a light blond, bleached out white on top from two or three weeks under the Florida sun.

She had been coming into the Tamiami's Lounge that long, and maybe longer, because when I did notice her, consciously, her face had a vague familiarity like someone who had been around for a time but hasn't registered on you before. I hadn't let on I noticed her even yet.

She always sat in the same place at the end of the bar, one stool away from the wall as if she were saving that seat for somebody who never came. A boy back in New York, I'd decided, who wasn't quite acceptable for her social position and wealth. Her parents had whisked her off to Miami Beach and let the broken hearts fall where they may. It's a standard practice with blue-blooded families.

Not that I really thought this kid's heart was too badly broken. One kind word and she would have generated a beautiful crush for me. That wasn't conceit. I knew the type. And I knew the crush would last approximately three weeks and then it would go out like a two-bit lighter in a hurricane.

And burn my fingers. Once burned is the price of any man's experience. But not twice!

"Why are you a barman, Kenny?" she asked when I came back with her change. She never gave me a tip and that was good. I could put up with bored females making passes, but I never got used to the ones who thought they could point and say, *I'll buy that one!* "I mean," she said, "you don't look or act like a barman."

"Give me a little time," I said, "I'm working on it. It takes practice." There was no one else in the bar now so I had no excuse to walk away from her.

"You don't like me very well, do you, Kenny?" She said it more in sorrow than in anger.

"Sure, I do." I gave her a smile to prove it. "You're one of my best customers. You *were* a good customer anyway. If you drink any more stingers you're going to get high and start singing or picking fights."

I DON'T know why I bothered. It was none of my business if she drank stingers till her eyes changed color. Maybe in spite of myself I liked her. But giving her some friendly advice was going too far. She quickly pushed her drink away, untouched, as if anything I said deserved full attention. In a minute she'd tell me why she'd been drinking them. And a sad story it would be, too.

But Lew Krist, the house detective, walked in at that point, and rescued me. I left the girl to get him a whisky, straight. He wasn't supposed to drink on duty but that was his own business. This one he needed. He downed it and opened his loose mouth to give the flames a chance to escape.

"Another one, Kenny. And in exchange I'll tell you about the corpse in the cabana."

"You can get just anything you like in those cabanas!" I said. "Some of these rich people have the queerest tastes!"

Krist looked at me reproachfully. "It isn't a joking matter, Kenny. Murder never is!"

"Well, not for the corpse, that's certain." I was being flip and tough for the girl's benefit. Show her my coarser side, I thought, and maybe she'd stop hanging around here with her heart in her eyes. "Who was murdered?"

"A guy named Bremer. From New York. He was shot in the neck. They think it was a thirty-two." Krist was important now. He had the stage for a moment. "One of the beach guards saw the door of Cabana thirty standing open. That's the farthest one to the north." He didn't have to tell me that. I took a forty-minute sun-bath down there every noon, weather permitting. Its remoteness gives me a lot of privacy;

also Cabana thirty was never in use. Krist explained that. "The John Soulks Hortons have thirty this season, but they've been over in Havana for a month."

"Bremer was a friend of theirs?" I asked. I wasn't interested, really. I just wanted to keep Krist there till some more customers came in or till the girl left.

Suddenly I saw the girl walking toward the door. Her chin was up. She was going out to face her bad moment with fortitude—and two stingers! For some reason I noticed her dress then. I don't know why. It was a sleeveless affair and didn't cost more than my week's salary. It had vertical stripes of yellow and green and crimson and wasn't as gaudy as it sounds. In fact, on her it looked very nice indeed.

"The cops haven't contacted the Hortons yet," Krist said. "So nobody knows what Bremer was doing in their cabana. Maybe the Hortons had called him in. He was a New York detective."

"A copper!" I said, trying to sound horrified. "Well, what can you expect if they let in that class of people? I don't know what the Tamiami is coming to!"

Krist said sadly, "You're young, Kenny. You don't know any better. When you've lived as long as I have and know about trouble—real trouble—you won't be so smart."

He walked off then, a stubby, soft little man who hadn't missed a meal in his life. I nearly threw his glass after him. He knew as much about trouble as old lady Horton's pomeranian.

Krist had never taken a chance on anything in fifty years. He'd never been hurt. But at the same time he hadn't ever known what it felt like to win and that's what griped him. He wanted all the breaks without risking anything. That last part was for me.

I wasn't risking anything either, from here on out. But I wasn't going to yammer if there wasn't any payoff. I picked up Krist's empty glass and moved down to the other end of the bar to the the girl's untouched stinger.

IT WAS then that I noticed her bag. It lay on the stool nearest the wall, the stool she always saved for the boy that never came. The bag was a cloth affair with the same yellow and green and crimson stripes as her dress. For a moment I was tempted to leave it there for somebody else to find because I knew she had left it behind as an invitation.

Her address and phone number would be in it, right on the top where I'd find it easily, in case I wanted to return it to her in person. I wondered, without any amusement, just how long she'd wait for me to bring it to her. About two days, I thought, then she'd come for it. I reached across the bar and yanked it off the stool.

The moment my fingers closed on it I could feel the contents through the cloth. I knew then she hadn't been drinking those stingers to nerve herself for a bad moment. The bad moment was past. She had needed a bracer. I was sorry I'd talked her out of that third stinger.

I ducked down under the bar just to be certain. Inside the bag and right on top was a thirty-two automatic. It had been fired once and very recently. I hid the bag far back on a little shelf, then poured a whisky straight for myself. After that I thought to look for her name. It was Anita Gage and she was staying here at the Tamiami.

Her name didn't mean a thing to me. . . .

At six o'clock, Miller Adams and Grule, the night men, took over the Lounge. Two men were needed in the evenings though the Lounge wasn't very large.

The big drinking, of course, is done on the roof in the Sky Gardens from dinner time till closing. During the day, things are quiet because all the cabanas carry their own set-ups. The Lounge was an after-thought on the part of the management for the added convenience of the guests. Also to pick up any stray dollars they might have missed elsewhere!

The first thing Miller Adams said

was, "Hi, Kenny, hear about the stiff in Cabana thirty?"

I said, yes, I'd heard about it. Then I added, "These rich punks will try anything for a thrill!"

"Krist claims he was a New York cop," Miller Adams said and made a face. "That means he probably wasn't! Krist can get more things wrong than any man I know."

I let him know I agreed with anything that wasn't complimentary to Krist, and then I went back to the little room at the rear to take off my white bar-coat. Grule was still there, smoking a last cigarette before going on duty.

I never knew him by any other name and I didn't know whether that was his first or last name. I think he would have fitted Anita Gage's picture of a barman.

Sallow-faced, with a thin brown moustache which served to camouflage some rather bad teeth. Hair neatly parted on the side and combed back. Here and there a couple of strands didn't fit very tightly and you could see it was thin underneath.

He blew out some smoke and said casually, "You got an extra hundred you aren't using, Kenny? I dropped a wad at Hialeah."

"I've got nothing smaller than a five-century note," I said. "But take it along. You can give me the change another time! By the way, are you sure a hundred's enough? Don't be bashful. You don't have to worry about paying it back."

"I didn't intend to," Grule said softly. "And if you're through making gags, think about this: I know you have a key to the Hortons' cabana!"

REMOVING my white jacket, I hung it on a peg. I didn't look at Grule and I didn't say anything.

"Nobody knows that but me," Grule went on in his oily deferential tone which he used on the millionaires he mixed drinks for. "I know a lot of things, Kenny. I know, for instance, that Larson, the name you've been using here isn't your right name. It's really Selton. I was in New York six months ago when you were getting your picture in all the papers.

"Look, you killed your wife in New York last summer because she wanted to divorce you. Society gal, wasn't she? The cops couldn't pin it on you. They had to call it an accident.

"You came down here and lost yourself. Now a New York cop gets shot in a cabana you have a key for. I don't say all that adds up to anything. I just say you'd save yourself a lot of bother if nobody knew about that key."

I turned and looked at him, not sure whether I should hit him or just walk out. It came as a shock that somebody down here should know about Rona and me. Maybe Grule knew what I was thinking.

He said hastily, "The trouble with you, Selton, is that you've got a bad temper. You threw your wife's brother down the stairs of your hotel, right into the lobby. Now you're thinking about taking a sock at me. What will that get you? Just a lot of trouble. All I need is a hundred."

He was too smooth at the racket for it to be his first time. This was a regular sideline with him. No big-time blackmail—just a dollar here, a dollar there. A hundred from me. He put out a hand, palm up, and I hit him square in the right eye.

He went down against the wall and his hair unraveled and fell over his forehead. He wasn't hurt but he lay where he was and there was nothing I could do but use my feet on him. I didn't want to waste a good shoe shine that way so I just walked out.

I went in back of the bar, got Anita Gage's striped bag and hid it under my coat. Miller Adams didn't pay any attention to me. I said good night to him and walked outside into the warm Florida night. Grule still hadn't come out of the back room.

I walked a block back from the beach to a parking lot and got in my car and drove along Dade Boulevard and across the causeway into Miami. I had a room

in a little hotel on Flagler Street. During all the time it took me to get there I wasn't feeling anything and I wasn't thinking. It was like holding my breath, suspending every emotion and instinct and thought, until I was safe in that little room.

When I had the door locked behind me I put Anita Gage's bag in a bureau drawer, took off my coat and flopped down on the bed. Then it hit me.

My head felt like I had a very tight hat on. There was something big inside me that was swelling up and getting ready to explode. Perspiration popped out all over me and I could hear my heart beating in my ears like surf. It lasted nearly ten minutes and it left me as weak as a watered martini.

I didn't know whether I was sorry about hitting Grule. He had it coming, but now he'd make things rough for me. Bremer wasn't in Florida because of me and so my having a key to Cabana thirty didn't mean a thing. Besides, I hadn't taken a sun bath today. No reason—I just hadn't. But by the time the cops worked all that out, the whole stinking mess would be dredged up out of its cesspool. And I didn't think I could take that again.

If it happened, I could thank Anita Gage. At the thought of it I swore until I couldn't think of any more words. I didn't care what sort of jam she was in, or how many detectives she killed, if she'd just leave me out of it. These blasted society girls! First Rona, now Anita Gage.

I lay there on the bed and tried not to think about Rona, but it didn't do any good. I couldn't *stop* thinking about her. I kept remembering her as she was the day I first met her at the Stage Door Canteen, four years ago.

I hadn't known anything about her then. She was just a beautiful gal who was a lot of fun to be with and to think about when I was back at Fort Monmouth. That wasn't much to base a marriage on but a lot of soldiers did some silly things in those days. That's not an alibi. That's just the way it was. We got married and it lasted exactly three days.

It was over the moment I went aboard that troopship but I didn't know till I got a letter a month later in England. Probably I wouldn't have known then except Rona's family had discovered you couldn't divorce a service man unless he consented. If she'd put it to me right, I would probably have agreed.

But I had enough people *telling* me what to do. The Newkirks could *ask* me to sign the papers or they could stuff them in the family vault. That's what they did with them. The Newkirks never asked for anything!

WHEN I was shipped back, last summer, I let Rona know I was in town. She didn't mean anything to me then and I was as ready as she was to call it quits. So she sent her brother with the papers! I didn't like that, and I didn't like him, a thin, pasty-face stuffed shirt.

He'd already been in so much trouble that his old man had practically disowned him. He was still a Newkirk though, and I was some unknown buck sergeant. When he got too nasty about it I heaved him down the stairs into the lobby.

The hotel made me move but it was worth it. Before I'd had time to move Rona came to see me. We started throwing things the moment she walked into the room. What did I mean, assaulting brother Blair? Sign the papers and be quick about it.

I still wanted to be asked!

The house detective broke it up before I threw her downstairs, too. But he heard us fighting and the homicide men leaped on that. The dick testified that I followed Rona outside to her car and homicide didn't believe I did it just to be overly polite.

They thought I was there when the car left the road only a few miles from the Newkirk's Connecticut place and crashed into a stone wall. They didn't think all the marks on Rona's head were caused by the accident. In short, they were convinced I murdered her.

It all fitted beautifully: our quarrel, my quick temper, the fact that I was

the last to see her alive. There was only one hitch—I was dead drunk in the back room of a Fourth Avenue saloon at the time Rona piled her car up. The barman swore to it and they couldn't shake him or two customers. The cops were convinced I'd paid for an alibi but they'd let me go.

My discharge from the army came through four days after Rona's death. I'd known it was coming but I hadn't told Rona. I left New York and kept going—to Miami Beach and a fill-in job as barman in the Lounge.

Wishing now that I hadn't been so hot-headed, didn't help a bit. . . .

First Rona, and now Anita Gage. I had a good notion to hand the striped bag over to the Miami cops and let that babe talk herself out of it. I knew I wouldn't do it, but I liked thinking about it. Maybe she had a good reason for drilling Bremer. She might have been entirely justified. I didn't know. And I didn't care.

Having a key to the Horton's cabana was no mystery. Old man Horton had given it to me. He was an old lecher himself and he thought everyone else was, too. I would have a whale of a time in that cabana, he thought, during the month they were in Havana. He'd be a puzzled old man if he knew how I actually used it.

From twelve to one Henderson came down from the Sky Gardens and took over the bar for me. I spent forty minutes of that hour lying on the sand getting some sunshine in my system. The cabana was a place to change into my trunks. A very quaint idea, no doubt!

I rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed. The same old merry-go-round was starting again and I was on it and couldn't get off. Grule and Anita Gage had seen to that.

I walked over to the bureau and got the bag out of the drawer. There was something pathetically brave about those bright yellow and green and crimson stripes. Like Anita Gage walking out of the Lounge this afternoon without that last stinger, her chin up, and hiding the panic which had rattled her so badly she'd run away without the gun. I couldn't help liking her for that. Even though she was a little dope, I couldn't just turn the gun into the police.

There were only two courses of action open to me: return the bag to Anita or throw it away. The last was out; that was taking an active part in it and it was none of my business. I put the bag under my coat again and went downstairs to my car.

It was just eight o'clock when I started across the causeway to the Beach.

THE Gages lived on the fourteenth floor of the Tamiami, Suite 1421. I got that out of Anita's bag.

A slim, white-haired woman opened the door. Her face was fuller, more matured than Anita's, and without that wide open ingenuous look. But she had the same million-dollar complexion.

She smiled and said, before I could open my mouth: "Nita's gone already. Was she expecting you?"

"I wouldn't know," I said. "When she comes back will you tell her Kenny called?"

"Oh, so you're Kenny." She smiled but her eyes gave me a quick once-over. "I've heard a great deal about you."

"That was some other Kenny," I said harshly. "I'm the barman in the Lounge."

"Oh," she said. "Perhaps it was, then. You might find Nita up in the Sky Gardens."

"Thanks."

I started away but she came out into the hall and said, "Kenny, will you tell her not to go out unless she has a coat?"

That did something to me. A mother worrying about her kid's health! The same kid who'd put a thirty-two bullet in a New York cop's neck a few hours ago.

I said, "I'll tell her, Mrs. Gage."

There wasn't anyone in the Sky Gardens who knew me, except Henderson, the chief barman, and I avoided him. The Sky Gardens was a big room, entirely enclosed by glass, so that from

one side you could look down on the beach where the Atlantic was creaming its surf in a long curve before the cabanas. From the other side you could see the lights of Miami shining across Biscayne Bay. It was a nice place for rich people if you could stand Donnie McGinn and his Tamiami Tropicaires trying to sound like Guy Lombardo and not doing so well.

The headwaiter came over and bowed just like I was a millionaire playboy. If I'd had more time and felt better I would have pushed that a little bit. But the bulge of the striped bag under my coat seemed as big as a brick. I asked for Miss Gage.

"She was here for dinner," he said doubtfully, "but I think she has left. Some of her party are here. Would you like to join them?"

I said all right, and followed him across the crowded room. Anita's party consisted of six or seven people and a champagne bucket. Any friend of Nita's was a friend of theirs. They might have taken me in even if they had known I was a barman. I didn't tell them. I asked where Anita had gone.

One of the girls said, "Down to the Lounge, I think, but don't follow her." She put a finger on her lips. "Very clandestine! But if you *do* find out who he is, come back and tell us."

I could have told them right then. A barman with a gun. I walked away without saying good-by. They never missed me.

There was a good crowd in the Lounge keeping Miller Adams and Grule on the run. Grule had the makings of a picturesque shiner and he gave me such a look that I thought it safer to order my drink from Miller Adams. I wasn't in the market for a mickey! When the drink came, I asked for Anita.

"Miss Gage?" Miller repeated. "Yeah, she was in here about twenty minutes ago. Asked for you, too. Said I was to tell you she hoped you got what she left for you this afternoon."

I thought that over and decided it was double-talk, meaning that she was counting on me to dispose of the gun for her. I swore at that till I ran out of words. I finished my drink just as Miller came back and put a phone on the bar in front of me.

"A call for you, sir," he said. "A lady, sir. You can take it here, sir." He went away grinning.

Anita Gage's voice said, "Kenny—I've been trying to find you. I've—got to see you." She sounded like the build-up for a case of hysterics.

I said, "All right, take it easy. Where'll I find you?"

"Meet me at Cabana thirty. Right away." She hung up so fast I barely heard her last two words.

I HITCHED the bag into place and hurried out the side door of the Lounge. A canopied walk leads along the side of the Tamiami to the terrace overlooking the beach. I was just going down the steps when Lew Krist caught up to me.

"Want to have a talk with you, Kenny," he said, taking my arm authoritatively.

"Later," I said. "I'm busy now."

"I've been hearing things, Kenny," he said, sounding important. He had to impress people! "Things that don't sound so good."

"You heard I have a key to the Hortons' cabana!" I snarled. "You heard I had some trouble in New York. You just keep your ears open, Lew, and maybe you'll hear about Grule being found in a cabana, too."

"I've heard more than that," he said ominously. "I heard—from the police—that Bremer was down here looking for you. They found papers in his room that show he was hired by people named Newkirk to find you."

I didn't know how my mind worked to click with something that had been there for a long time. Association of ideas maybe. How had the Newkirks learned I was in Miami Beach. Somebody had recognized me from old days. Anita Gage! Now I knew why she had looked vaguely familiar. She'd been at the Canteen with Rona. She'd been, I remembered now, Blair Newkirk's girl.

I lost my head then. I shook my arm loose. I was too mad, at Anita mostly, to care what I was saying, or how it sounded.

"If you've got a case against me, Lew, arrest me! Prove I killed Bremer! Now's your chance to be a hero. That's what you want. Go ahead, be a big shot!"

He would have been one if he'd done it. If he turned me over to the cops with the murder gun under my arm, and the key to the Hortons' Cabana in my pocket, the Miami cops would do what their New York brothers hadn't been able to do. They'd really hang it on me this time.

But Krist hesitated. He thought of what would happen if I resisted and took a swing at him. He thought of the results of a false arrest charge. In short, he thought! He'd never taken a chance in fifty years and he was too old to break a habit.

"I'll have to turn you in, Kenny," he said sadly. "I haven't told anyone about the key, but that was a serious threat you just made about Grule."

"Go walk your beat!" I told him, and he went—to turn me in.

As soon as he was out of sight I walked to the beach and plodded northward through the loose sand toward Cabana thirty. I didn't see Anita until I came around in front of the cabana. She was standing at the corner, very tense and wooden, wearing a white dress. That was about all I could see of her in the dark.

"Have you a key for this?" she asked.

"Yes, I've got the key," I said. "Also the gun!"

I turned and unlocked the door and she hit me squarely across the back of the head so hard I nose-dived into the cabana. I landed on the hard bulge of the gun and nearly cracked a rib. I remembered thinking how tough I must be when a cracked rib should hurt so little. Then nothing hurt, inside or out. Nothing at all.

When I came around, I was still lying in the dark on the floor of the cabana. Anita had had some help—I sensed that right away. Then a flashlight beam hit me in the face. I recoiled from it, and that was all that saved me. Something sang past my face, so close I could smell oil on it. A pistol butt.

"No—no!" Anita cried and threw herself at the man.

They struggled briefly, and then Anita landed, sobbing, in a corner. The flashlight beam stabbed down at me again and the man floated in behind it.

I shot him in the stomach and he screamed like a woman. The flashlight plummeted to the floor and rolled away toward the door. From outside the cabana came shouts and the sound of running feet. I rolled shakily to my knees, trying to locate Anita.

I had a terrible fear that she would rush over to me and in the dark I couldn't take a chance that it wasn't my assailant. I would have to shoot Anita.

FLAME danced suddenly from behind a great wall of sound. I didn't hear the bullet hit the side of the cabana. I didn't know how close it was. The sound had deafened me. I was lining up Anita's thirty-two for a return shot when the door blew inward before the charge of two cops.

"You're under arrest," one of them yelled at me. "Drop that gun!"

I dropped it. I could have picked off one of them at least, maybe both. That's how good they were.

Behind them came two more uniformed cops, one plainclothesman and, of course, Lew Krist. All those flashlights lit up the cabana so I could see what had happened. I helped Anita to her feet and then I took a look at the man with the bullet in his stomach.

And it was a man, biologically speaking. He had his arms wrapped around his stomach and he was crying like a baby wanting sympathy. I didn't recognize him at first. I hadn't seen his pasty face for six months. Not since the day I threw him downstairs into a hotel lobby.

"Blair Newkirk!" I said.

Rona's brother. His tears didn't do a thing to me. He still hadn't stopped

crying when they carted him away.

I never did learn the plainclothesman's name. He was a lieutenant and he had a voice that sounded as if he was yelling down a rain barrel and his chest was the barrel. He didn't have much hair or patience but he managed to get where he was going. We were in an unused office in the Tamiami, and he was trying to get Anita to tell her version.

He'd wanted me to start but I kept saying I didn't know anything. His cops had the handcuffs on me and I decided I wouldn't even tell him the time of day till the cuffs came off.

"I guess it was mostly my fault, Kenny," Anita said, looking at me as if she expected to be hated. "I mentioned seeing you here in a letter I wrote to some people in New York. Blair Newkirk heard about it. He wrote to me, wanting to know where you lived.

"I didn't tell him. I knew you didn't want people to know you were here. You wouldn't be a barman if you weren't hiding . . ." She paused, then added in a voice that was full of gentle reproach, "I remembered you were a construction engineer. You built bridges before the war."

"So Bremer was hired to find him," the lieutenant interrupted. "Why did you kill him, Selton?" he asked me.

I told him where to go.

"Kenny didn't kill him," Anita said quickly. "At least, I don't think he did. I thought so this afternoon but not any more."

Bremer, she explained, had asked her where I was. She wouldn't tell him. He scouted around and found out I worked in the Lounge. He learned about my noon sun baths and laid for me in the Horton's cabana. He picked the lock, I guess.

Anita, up in the Sky Gardens for lunch, saw him go into the cabana and from the distance mistook him for me. A few minutes later someone went in. She thought it was Bremer. Actually it was Blair Newkirk.

When Anita got down there from the Sky Gardens she found Bremer dead on the cabana floor, the gun beside him, where Newkirk, in a panic at what he'd done, had dropped it. Thinking I'd killed him, Anita stole the gun.

"I didn't want you to get into trouble," she explained. "I was going to give it to you this afternoon but that house detective came in."

So she got scared of being found with the gun. She couldn't think of any other way of getting it to me except to leave her bag for me to find.

"Why was young Newkirk looking for you?" the lieutenant asked me. "Revenge for killing his sister?"

"I didn't kill her, you fool!" I yelled. "Tell your boy to get these handcuffs off me."

He sighed and gestured to one of the cops.

"Now," he said when I was free. "Why was Newkirk looking for you?"

"I haven't any idea," I said, rubbing my wrists.

I didn't have, either. Neither did Anita. Newkirk told it in his confession, given because he thought that bullet in his stomach was going to kill him.

IT WAS this: Rona was to inherit a quarter of a million dollars on her twenty-fifth birthday from her grandmother's estate. I hadn't known about it because I hadn't particularly given a hoot about Rona's assets at first. Later, I didn't give a hoot about Rona!

Her birthday was next month and with Rona dead, I was the next heir. Blair was trying to get to me before I discovered that. I don't know what he intended to do—try to make a deal or maybe kill me.

There was a clause in the will that if Rona, for any reason, should not be around to collect her inheritance and there was no immediate family—husband or children—Blair was next in line to receive the money.

And how he needed it! His wild living had put him in three or four different jams all at the same time. Rona's money was all that could save him from a jail sentence.

But hiring a shady private detective turned out to be his undoing. Bremer promptly investigated both ways and saw a chance for a big killing. He'd tried to put the pressure on Blair for a cut of that quarter of a million, and when Blair bluffed him out of it he'd planned to sell it to me. That's why he was in the cabana today.

But Newkirk, suspecting what Bremer was up to, had hastily flown down to Florida and he killed Bremer in the Horton's cabana not three minutes before Anita got there.

And he still didn't know where I was, never having been in the Lounge. So he kidnapped Anita and forced her to make that phone call luring me to the cabana. He figured to do us both in at once, and he would have, if Anita hadn't interfered long enough for me to get that thirty-two out of her purse.

It was nearly morning before the cops let me go. They wired the New York police to check Newkirk's whereabouts on the day Rona cracked up. They had an idea that he either faked her accident, or found her alive in the wrecked car and finished her off. I couldn't see what difference it made.

They had him for the Bremer kill, and they couldn't hang him any higher for two than one.

I went back to my room in the rosy dawn and packed my clothes and then checked out. I had the car gassed and oiled. Then I drove across the causeway to the Tamiami. I parked right in front along with all the shiny limousines and just snarled at the doorman when he tried to shoo me away.

I went up to the Gage's suite on the fourteenth floor. Anita and her mother were both there.

"I came up to thank you," I told her. "You got me out of a bad spot."

"I was glad to do it, Kenny," she said. "Besides, you thought you were helping *me* out."

"That's right," I said, and after that there wasn't anything else to say. Anita's mother gave me that nice smile and she didn't say anything. Anita just watched me with those great big blue eyes and she didn't say anything either. Maybe I had that coming. I said, "If you should see any of the Newkirks will you tell them they can stuff Rona's inheritance in their family vault! I don't want a cent of it."

I wasn't being proud or dramatic. I just didn't want anything from the Newkirks.

I said good-by then, and went downstairs to the Lounge. Henderson had taken over because I hadn't showed up at nine o'clock. He started crabbing about it but I cut him short.

"I've quit," I said. "I'm heading for the West coast to build bridges. I'll write and tell you where to send the money I've got coming. Say good-by to Miller for me."

Then I went out to my jalopy. I got in and Anita was sitting there waiting for me, her heart in her eyes.

She said, more in sorrow than in anger, "You were going away again, Kenny."

She meant I'd gone once before, four years ago. That was when her crush had started and it had lasted longer than three weeks—four years in fact. That empty stool she always saved had been for me.

"Where were you going, Kenny?"

I looked at her and I thought. *You have to take a chance on something!* Unless I wanted to turn into a petty little man like Lew Krist! I said: "It's a big country. Where would you like to go?"

•

Three Outstanding Complete Mystery Novels by Top-Flight Writers—POISON IN JEST by John Dickson Carr, ABOUT THE MURDER OF GERALDINE FOSTER by Anthony Abbot, and POP, GOES THE QUEEN by Bob Wade and Bill Miller — All in the Gala Fall Issue of Our Companion Magazine TRIPLE DETECTIVE, Now on Sale, Only 25c at all Stands!

A Bargain IN CRIME

by SAM SLEUTH

ONCE again, after haunting the 25c reprint stands that throng the nation's drug stores, department stores, newsstands and other outlets, your cut-rate detective is back to make his report. Inevitably he is a bit groggy from extended perusal of an endless chain of new mystery and detective novels in handy form but for all that he remains unbloody and unbowed.

Picking four winners out of the field remains a lot like selecting four individual leaves as outstanding on one artichoke. But we feel certain that no lover of fictional violence and puzzles will be disappointed by any of the following. To us they remain the best in the current crop.

Reviews In Brief

THE DREADFUL NIGHT by Ben Ames Williams

Post-season existence can become a pretty bleak affair in an isolated summer resort. Molly Main had to learn this the hard way when her husband failed to come up from the city to help her close their island house. And when the renowned operatic soprano, Adah Capello, who lived on the next island in the lake was slain that night, her loneliness turned to terror.

Reinforced by the presence of Nell Harmon, another of her neighbors, she could only wait for her husband to arrive and pray that the famous emerald he had bought from the opera singer was not the object of the killer's quest. And when, instead of her husband, it was the murderer who turned up, Molly learned the true meaning of fear. Panic for everyone in this as well as an engrossing style.

●

DANGER IN PARADISE by Octavus Roy Cohen

Iris Randall, radio singer, takes one of those trips to Havana and returns not only with a sunburn but a box of the fine perfectos for which the Cuban capital is noted. In her wake and that of the cigars, trails as baffling and murderous a conspiracy as ever had the Manhattan Homicide Bureau scratching its collective head.

Jimmy Drake, in love with Iris, finds his suit for her hand derailed by the corpse of a night-club impresario who has the bad taste to collide with violent death in her apartment. Everything, it seems, was not quite as it should be with the lovely canary's jaunt to Cuba.

To add to the puzzlement the box of cigars seems to be the focus of the trouble which is considerable to begin with and gets rapidly worse. One of the most tightly woven tales ever to stem from the typewriter of a master of modern mystery.

●

APPOINTMENT WITH DANGER by David Garth

From the Civil War battlefield of Spottsylvania, via a mis-mailed letter in a modern Manhattan law office, to Rio de Janeiro, to Castle Glenfairlie in Scotland, Mr. Garth spins a magnificent story of human conflict and baffling mystery.

This is one of the very best stories of international intrigue and murder we have ever read.

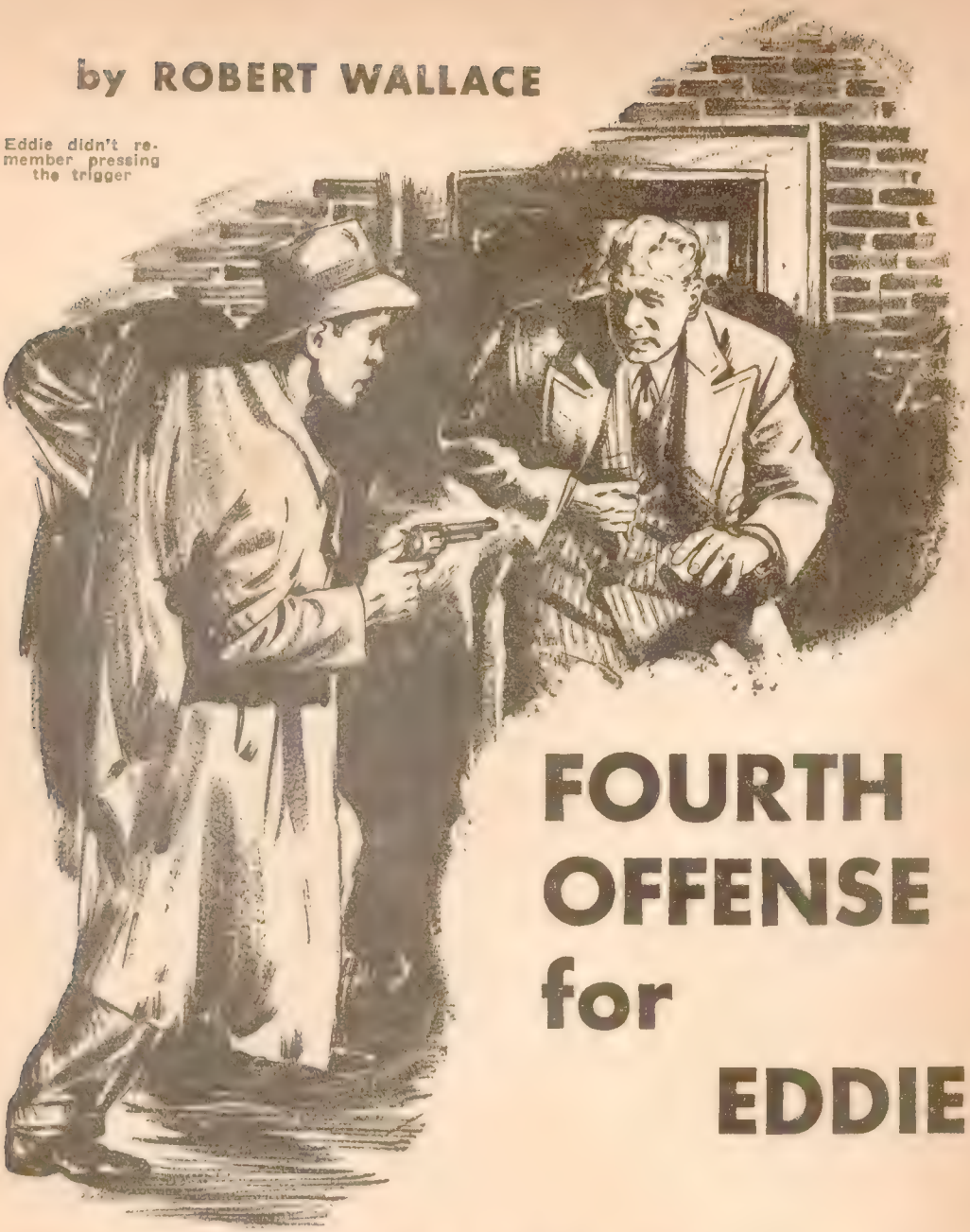
●

THE CASE AGAINST MRS. AMES by Arthur Somers Roche

When Mrs. Ames is acquitted of slaying her husband the world at large is pleased—for Rose Ames is one of the most beautiful widows on record. But one reporter who covered the trial, Sam Kernochan, remains so violent a one-man minority that he loses his job.

Thereupon the lady herself hires him to dig up the true killer, launching him on a quest which brings mounting tension and terror to both of them even while it carries him from facet to facet of that strange and fascinating cross section of human New York that is generally called cafe society. A welcome addition to the reprint ranks and a sure-fire mystery entertainment bet!

by ROBERT WALLACE



Eddie didn't remember pressing the trigger

FOURTH OFFENSE for EDDIE

It was one pretty roll of bills the victim carried—but it was too pretty to be true!

IT was raining. Two blocks to the south the glow of Swing Lane made the darkness mellow. A neon-and-mazda foothill to the mountain of light just beyond that was Times Square. But Fifty-fourth Street, at one minute before two in the morning,

was black and shiny, its deserted sidewalks lit only by well-separated fuzzy circles from the street lamps.

Eddie Gardiner read the time from his cheap wristwatch by the faint glow that reached the doorway in which he waited. He rubbed a damp hand across his broken nose, sniffed and peered out at the street. Within the margin of a minute or two—not more than five—a taxicab would stop at the corner of Sixth Avenue. A fat man with bulging eyes would get out and walk west, past the doorway in which Eddie was waiting.

Eddie had been checking the fat man's nocturnal doings for six days. Proprietor of a Columbus Avenue cafe uptown, the overweight gentleman with the bulging eyes invariably walked to a house in the block where a big "game" was currently being held. It was rumored he owned a part of the game.

Eddie cared little about the man's holdings outside of those in his wallet, which was reported to be well-stuffed. Tonight, the fat man was going to lose it. Eddie looked at his watch again, impatiently. It was one minute past the hour.

If anything had happened to the guy—if he didn't show up tonight—but Eddie shoved the thought from him. He had to have a roll. Once he got it he would take a cab at Seventh and ride downtown to the Pennsylvania Station. There he would pay the man off, disappear into the subway network and take a train back to Fiftieth Street on the West-Side I.R.T.

Joanna would be waiting for him in a cafeteria on the corner. Joanna was why he had to have the dough. To Eddie, Joanna was a pretty kid and, even more remarkable for his shadowy world, a straight one. She was at the end of her rope here in town—she simply didn't have the talent to climb in show business. She was leaving and Eddie was going with her.

WHERE, he didn't know. The rest of the United States, save for certain of its gray-walled institutions, was just a lot of names on a map to Eddie. But with Joanna he didn't care. He might even marry her sometime if they continued to hit it off. But he had to have getaway dough, lots of it. He hadn't exactly built himself down in the course of his courtship.

A cab pulled to a halt on the corner and he snapped out of his reverie. A fat man got out and paid off the driver, then turned and walked rapidly toward the doorway in which Eddie waited. He had bulging eyes and wheezed slightly with the effort of walking.

Eddie gripped the gun in his topcoat pocket and stepped directly into the path of the fat man. "In here," he said quietly, but with authority.

The fat man looked surprised, then angry. But, as Eddie motioned with his head, he backed obediently into the dark doorway, hands level with his shoulders.

"Turn around," said Eddie. One swipe with the butt of his gun, a quick run through his victim's pockets and he would be on his way to Joanna.

But the fat man had other ideas. He turned, all right—but kept on turning in a complete circle, lashing out at Eddie's face with a savage pivot punch. Eddie ducked and swore. He staggered back a few feet and almost lost his grip on the gun in his pocket as the fist struck his shoulder.

Then he went bulling in, crowding the fat man back against the door and bringing up his head to butt him savagely in the jaw. The fat man grunted in pain and stepped on his feet and bullied him clear—or almost clear.

Eddie didn't remember pressing the trigger. It must have been reflex action on his part. But, suddenly, the gun in his hand went off. He had pulled it clear of his pocket. The fat man wheezed and stumbled and then seemed to melt into a damp heap on the entryway floor.

"Cripes!" muttered Eddie. This was not according to plan. The fat man did not move as Eddie's deft fingers plucked the wallet from his breast pocket. There was a spreading pool of blood beneath him. The wallet was fat, like its recent owner.

Eddie slipped out of the doorway, stuffing gun and wallet into his topcoat pockets, moving in the shadows, just short of a run. A police whistle sounded frighteningly close and several windows were nois-

ily upthrust. To his relief a cab was coming down Seventh Avenue when he reached the intersection. He climbed in and told the driver to take him to Penn Station. He was clear.

With trembling fingers he pulled out the wallet, examined its contents. His excitement increased as his fingers felt the reassuring crispness of a thick fold of bills—hundreds, fifties, twenties, none smaller. Their total, from a rough estimate, was close to five thousand dollars. He threw the wallet out the window, stuffed the money into his own shabby billfold—shabby and empty.

It had been close but he was okay. He rubbed cold sweat on his forehead. If he had been caught—even if he hadn't killed the fat man—it meant life. For Eddie was a three-time loser and the Baumes Law said he would spend the rest of his life behind bars if he were caught committing another felony—even a small felony. It was, all in all, a good thing that he was leaving town.

He gave the surprised cabby a twenty and told him to keep the change. Then, head low, he darted into the station. The fellow hadn't even got a good look at him. He was safe. No one had seen him save his victim—and he wouldn't be talking. Even if he weren't dead, if he recovered, how could he identify Eddie? It had been a dark doorway on a dark night.

JOANNA was waiting at their regular table in the rear of the bright cafeteria. Two imitation leather suitcases stood beside her chair. She was ready. Her smile of greeting as he bore down on her was the nicest thing he had seen all night—nicer even than the thick roll of bills, the presence of which in his pocket gave him new assurance.

"Hi, baby," he said. "Been waiting long?"

"Not long," she told him. "Are you ready?"

"On the nose," he said. "I pulled off a major operation tonight." He showed her his wallet. Looking at the money, he realized he was going to need some smaller change for traveling. He got up and went to the sleepy-eyed cashier whose straw-colored hair was piled like cake-frosting on her head. He gave her a twenty.

"Gimme change," he said. She took the bill he handed her, glanced at it, nodded, then got up.

"It will take a minute," she said. "We ain't got that much in the till."

"Take your time, sister," he told her. "I'll be back at that table." He nodded his head toward Joanna, whose eyes followed him with doglike devotion. He blew her a kiss, which she returned, winked at the cashier and walked back to the table.

"We can take off for Florida now," he told her. He had never been to Florida. The idea had just popped into his head and he began to sell her on it. Miami would be a lot more fun than the hick town Joanna hailed from. Some of the mob would be down there—and all of the big shots. She wasn't hard to sell.

Suddenly he realized that the girl was looking past him, her dark eyes wide with what looked like terror. Her face was white beneath her makeup.

"Hey, baby, what's wrong?" he said, half rising and turning around.

Three burly men stood right behind his chair. He had been too engrossed in his dream of Miami to notice their entrance. But Eddie knew a cop when he saw one, whether he wore a uniform or not. All three of these men were cops.

Somehow they had trailed him—he didn't know how but it had happened. All thought of Florida faded before the vision of prison walls closing in on him for keeps—perhaps even the hot seat. There was only one thing left to do. His pistol was still in his pocket.

"Hi, Eddie," said one of the men. "Better not, Eddie." The detective's smile faded as Eddie's hand went to his coat pocket. Eddie managed to get one shot away through the fabric of his coat pocket, but that was all he had time for. Distantly he heard Joanna's scream as three police slugs tore their way into his body. He sank to his knees, one arm resting on the table, the other trying to hold himself together. He was coming apart inside.

"How come, Eddie?" one of the detectives asked. His face was gray and he licked his lips nervously. Why, Eddie

wondered, should a cop be nervous.

"How did you know I knocked over Nick Weston?" he asked. "I'd a sworn nobody saw me."

"You—Nick Weston?" The three detectives exchanged a significant glance and one of them ran toward a telephone. Their leader regarded Eddie with something akin to compassion in his flint-hard blue eyes.

"Tough luck, Eddie," he said. "We came in here on a call from the cashier that someone had passed her a counterfeit twenty." He looked at Eddie, whose head had fallen on the table, then at Joanna, who sat stricken in her chair. "Sorry, miss," he added, shaking his head. "He's gone."

GOOD CRIMES ARE COMING

(*Continued from page 9*)

ed into his throat when he opened it and saw it contained a diamond bracelet and ten or twelve rings. He could easily see that the jewels were worth a fortune — and he had stolen them!

The letters proved to be from a man who signed himself by the name of "Charles." They were intimate, personal missives revealing a great love and a great concern on the part of the man that Hazel continue with her music. The most recent letter was bitter and hurt. It hinted that Hazel had found romance with someone called "Bill" and planned to go away with him. Charles was sorry and disappointed, but he warned her that she could not escape—could not run away from herself.

Was it possible that Hazel had merely eloped with Bill? Eddie thought about it, then discarded the idea. Eloping or not, why would she leave untouched food on the table and all her clothes on the bed? Then, too, there was the enigma of the broken violin.

No, the more Eddie considered the matter the more he became convinced the blonde had met with foul play. Meanwhile, what was he going to do with the jewels?

He decided to sleep on it. But he wasn't given time. A telephone call

[*Turn page*]

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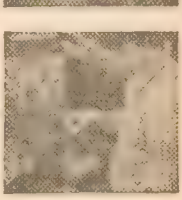

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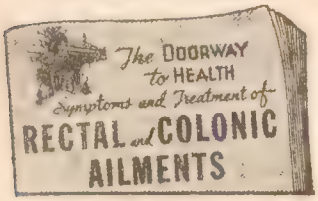

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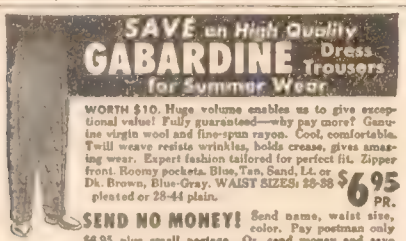

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came for him. The call marked the first event in a sinister and baffling conspiracy that was to trap him and make him wish he had never gotten curious about the phantom blonde.

A strange male voice was on the other end of the wire. It warned him bluntly: "You better lay off, Eddie. You know about it."

His heart pounding with excitement, Eddie bluffed it out, pretending he didn't know what the man was talking about.

"You'll get that Sunday suit torn to shreds if you don't stay out," the voice warned.

Eddie brazenly informed the other man he intended staying in and wound up by making an appointment to meet the fellow in a small park near Sutton Place.

The First Break

Realizing he could be walking into an ambush, Eddie took a revolver along. Nothing could have stopped him now. This was the first break. This call had to have something to do with the blonde and he meant to learn more about her disappearance.

He reached the park, strolled through the darkened paths until he came to the bench which had been designed as the rendezvous spot. A man was sitting hunched over on the bench. Eddie looked around to be sure he was alone then moved up to the man and spoke.

There was no answer. Eddie leaned forward, peered closely at the man. The man's eyes were open. But they were glassy, lifeless. There was a dark stain on his face that could only be blood. The man was dead.

Eddie didn't know if this was a warning. But he did know that whoever was behind the blonde's disappearance knew his name and where he lived and that he had to get out of the park fast.

From that moment trouble walks hand in hand with Eddie McCrae. He learns that someone had seen him enter the park and his description has been flashed to the police. And all the while the men behind that mysterious telephone call, the men

behind that brutal murder, are waiting to strike at him to keep him from snooping. Doggedly he keeps digging. He finds friends of Hazel, but they refuse to talk. And, later, they deny ever having seen him so that he finds himself butting up against a blind wall.

The tension mounts rapidly from one breath-taking scene after another with each step of Eddie's investigations taking him closer to his own ruin. So watch for our next issue and "The Lady in Question" by Will Oursler if you want a real bang-up thrill in fiction entertainment!

A Timothy Trant Novelet

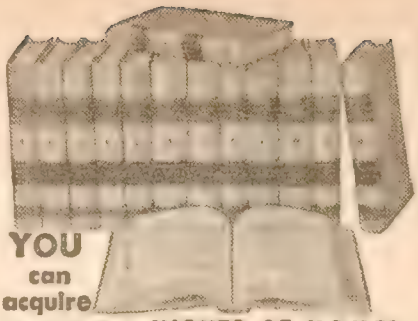
"The Wrong Envelope" by Q. Patrick brings back dapper, quick-thinking Lieutenant Timothy Trant (the man with the matching suits and neckties) who starred in those recent mystery successes "Death and the Maiden" and "Death for Dear Clara" in a vigorous, compelling novelet.

Kate Laurence, young and beautiful and rich, had always been pretty much alone in the world from the time an airplane crash orphaned her at an early age. She had never had many friends. The only exceptions were Toby Palmer, trustee of her father's estate and Angelica Mills, a school chum on whom she had lavished many gifts.

Then, suddenly she fell in love with Martin Downs, son of a former trustee and partner in Toby Palmer's law firm. Downs was now a junior partner of the firm and he had enough money to assure Kate that he wanted her for herself, not for her wealth.

With her wedding just a few days away Kate was happy. Looking through her mail she found a letter from Angelica. That, too, made her happy. For she and Angelica had quarreled bitterly sometime ago over Martin. Angelica had tried to talk Kate out of marrying Martin. There had been savage words. Then Kate had relented and had asked Angelica (who was married to Francis Mills, an ex-GI whose wounds had kept him from finding work) to be her matron

[*Turn page*]



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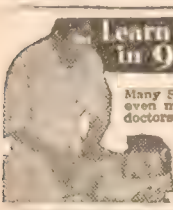

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of honor.

Eagerly Kate tore open the envelope. She was sure it was Angelica's acceptance. But her heart turned to ice when she saw that the envelope contained a letter addressed to Martin!

All Kate's dream castles came tumbling down around her as she read the horrible revelation of Martin and Angelica's betrayal. Angelica spoke of cheating on her husband and not minding Martin's marrying Kate. The letter ended with: "Poor Kate, be kind to her for my sake. And don't worry. After your 'blissful' honeymoon I'll always be there when you want me."

The betrayal was all the more bitter, for Kate had just finished speaking on the telephone to Martin. He was on his way in from Washington and he had reiterated his love for her and his desire to be with her in a few hours.

It was Toby Palmer who helped Kate and advised her to fight for Martin — to confront Angelica with the letter and have a showdown.

Finally, Kate got up the courage to go. Palmer, who employed Angelica as a secretary, arranged to send her home early so that Kate could have it out with her.

When Kate arrived she found Francis Mills, Angelica's husband, there. He tried to be gay and entertaining, but underneath was the old bitterness at his inability to support Angelica. He made some Manhattan cocktails, brought them into the living room, poured out two drinks.

The Force of Hate

At that moment Angelica walked in. Francis immediately ducked out to perform a delayed errand.

Facing Angelica and realizing, for the first time, the guile and deceit in the girl's make-up, Kate understood what hatred really was. She could feel it gnawing inside her like sharp teeth.

Angelica was suffering from hay fever and her face was mottled. She blew her nose, took out an inhaler and pressed it to her nose. Kate, always the soul of kindness, now found

herself enjoying the other girl's discomfort.

Angelica offered Kate a drink. Kate refused. Angelica set down her glass, picked up the second glass and took a long drink. Then Kate told her she had received her letter — the wrong letter—addressed to Martin. She told her there would be no wedding now and she added: "I hate you, Angelica. I want to say it, to get it out of me."

There was a tinkle of glass. Angelica had dropped her cocktail. She was staring stupidly ahead of her. There was a loose smile on her lips.

"I was wrong," she murmured. "Kate, I know now. When Martin comes I—"

Her voice failed and she toppled to the floor dead.

And while Kate looked at her in shocked amazement the bell pealed. Woodenly she moved to the door. Martin was there. Martin, who was

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supposed to come to her own apartment, had come to Angelica's place instead!

Into the turbulence of murder and smashed love walked Lieutenant Trant. Although Toby Palmer and Martin Downs rallied to Kate's side the evidence that Trant uncovered pointed more and more inexorably toward Kate herself.

But Trant was patient and he was thorough. He didn't like the implications of Angelica's murder. And he didn't like one or two things that Kate and Martin did before Kate found herself suspecting Martin and realized, too late, that she had destroyed valuable evidence. It was also too late when Kate understood what Angelica was trying to tell her as she died.

The Key to the Case

Fast as Trant moved to wind up the case he almost lost out because he forgot that a girl like Kate, broken and unhappy, is capable of almost anything. And he never expected her to go after a missing shorthand pad—the key to the case—but she did and it put her squarely in the hands of the killer.

There is no greater writer of detective stories today than Q. Patrick and the combination of taut, powerful writing and Lieutenant Trant's fine sleuthing make "The Wrong Envelope" a real thriller.

As we have already indicated, there will be a host of other stories and features in our next issue so be on hand for some fine reading.

From Our Readers

DESPITE the current vogue in psychological suspense thrillers (by the way, it's already on the wane) the tough, hard-boiled yarn still remains very popular. At least, it's true of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE readers. Since we published Brett Halliday's new Michael Shayne mystery "Murder is a Habit" we have received many laudatory letters expressing delight in the story and asking for more of the same.

As an example, we quote from Gene

Harvey of Des Moines, Iowa:

Dear Editor: "Murder is a Habit" which appeared in the summer issue of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE was, to my mind, the best of a long line of successful Mike Shayne mysteries. It had the usual hard-boiled action which I like and a fine mystery. No wonder the character Mike Shayne stays on the air waves. It's one well worth having around. Mike has given me some of my most pleasant hours of relaxation. Let's have more like this one.

Well, Gene, we can say the same thing about the fighting redhead. He's a good guy and well-liked and his creator really knows his business. Ed Ryan of Lansing, Michigan also puts in a strong bid for Mike Shayne. We quote:

Dear Editor: If ever there was a fiction character who seems to come fully alive like a real person it is Brett Halliday's redheaded private investigator, Mike Shayne. The guy is real. In fact, sometimes I can't help imagining that he actually does exist and has been disguised by Halliday under the name of Shayne. Maybe he's a friend of the author or some well-known detective. Anyhow, I like him and I want to thank MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE for a mighty fine novel in "Murder is a Habit" which I just finished reading.

Glad you enjoyed the story, Ed, and that you like Mike Shayne. As far as we've been able to find out from the author, Shayne is not a real person. But he is fashioned after a big redhead the author once saw in a New Orleans bar. A man with an incomparable air of bravado, a devil-may-care individual, tough and capable looking. A man who had been ushered out of the place by two sinister gents with hands in bulging pockets — but who walked out, smiling, mocking and serene. Halliday never did find out what happened to the stranger, but he's sure he came out okay. And Shayne is a result of his memory of the man and the scene.

There were lots of other letters for which we are duly grateful. We regret that we cannot print them all. But keep writing. We enjoy every letter—and they help us plan future issues. Just write to: The Editor, MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE, Best Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thank you!

—THE EDITOR.

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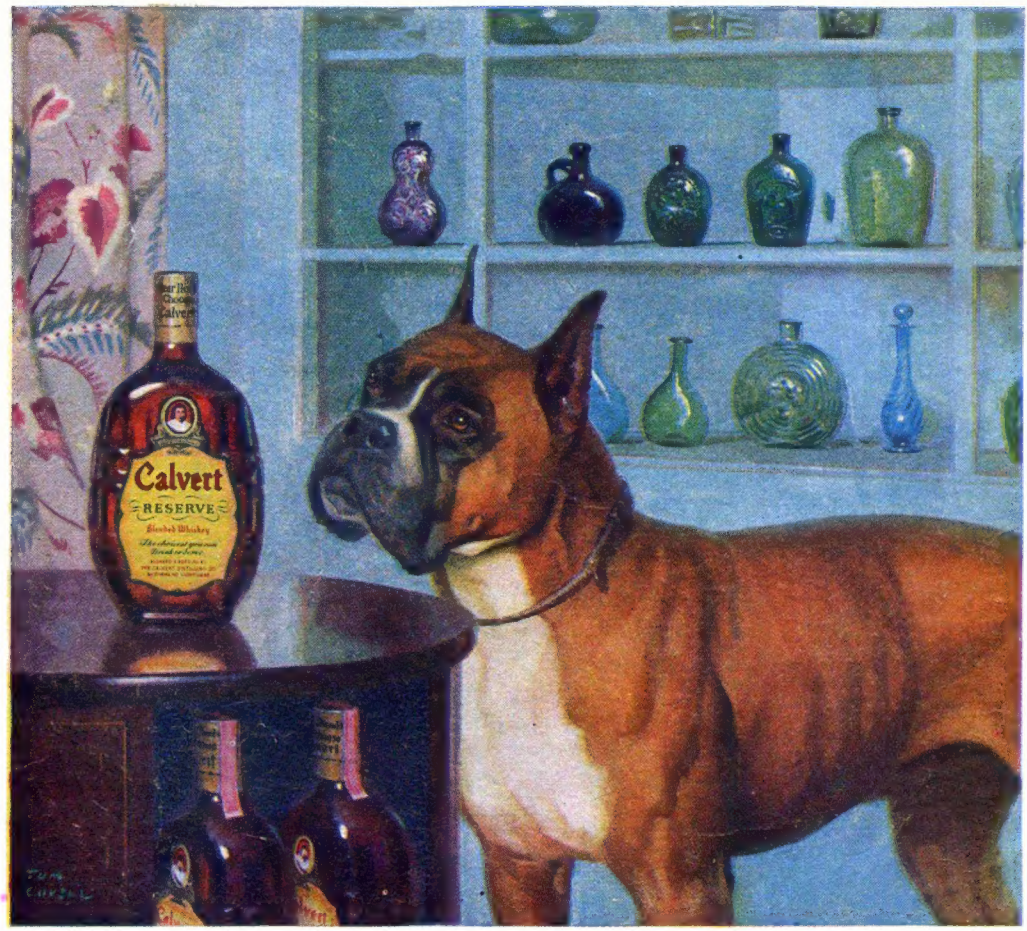

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